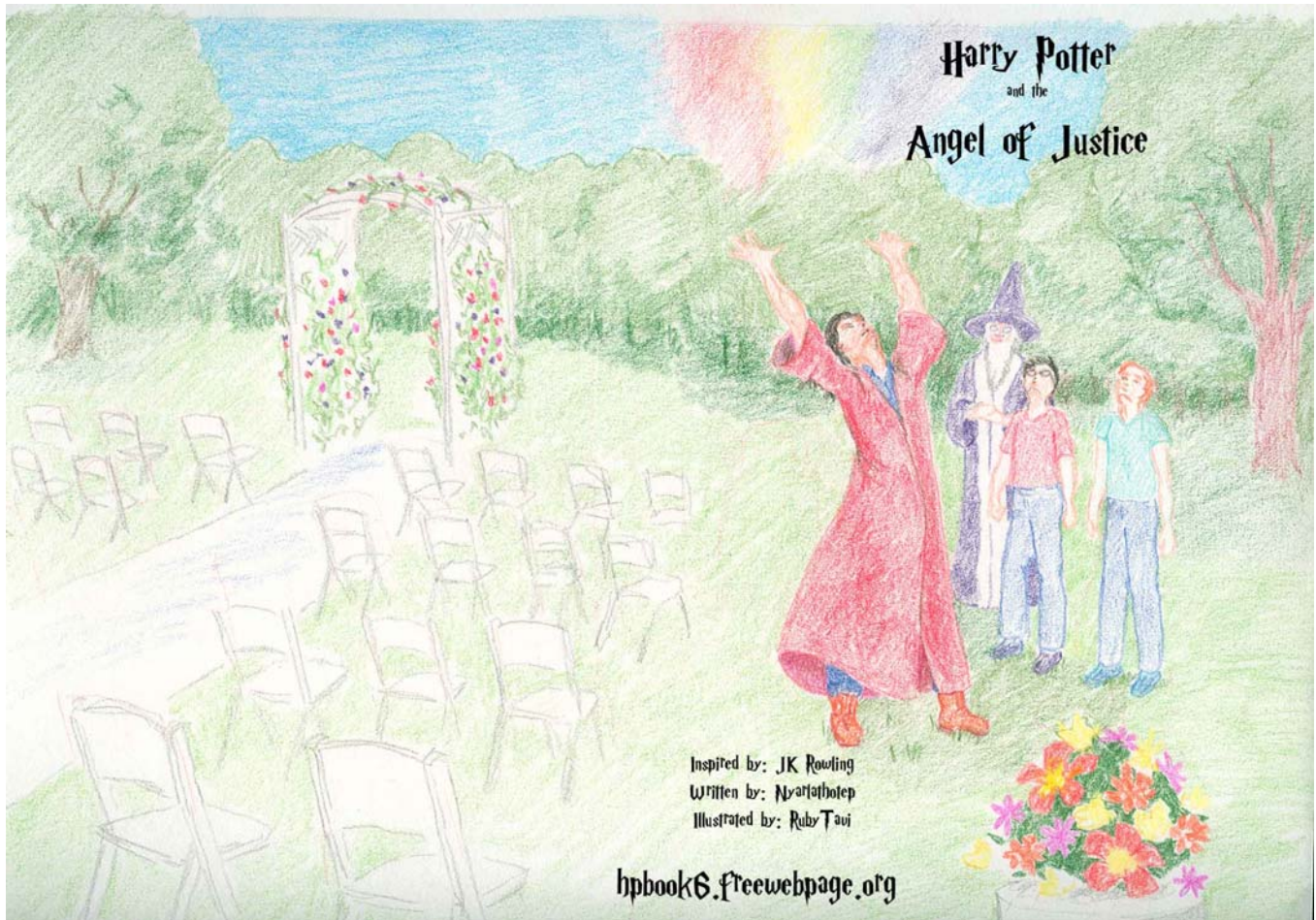


Harry Potter and the Angel of Justice



Back and Front Cover Art

Please note that this is a Fanfic. JK Rowling did not write this and had nothing to do with it. I wrote this simply as a tribute to a great writer who has given me endless hours of joy. The plot of the story is now finished and all contained in this document. There is still lots of editing to do so please try to ignore the grammatical mistakes and wordy bits.

Any comments are very welcome and I ask that you to let me know that you actually read me story.

Please also note that this document is getting out of date.

[Http://hpbook6.freewebsite.org](http://hpbook6.freewebsite.org) will always have the newest

version.

To send comments, corrections or suggestions send email to harry_potter_AOJ@yahoo.com or send a message to me on yahoo messenger (userid is harry_potter_AOJ) or AOL instant messenger (userid is gnyarlthotep). I upload the changes to the free hosting site <http://hpbook6.freewebsite.org>, you can also check eDonkey, Ares or Shareaza for new versions.

I hope you forgive my neophyte writing skills,
Nyarlathotep

Harry Potter and the Angel of Justice

Harry Potter and the Angel of Justice Year Six At Hogwarts

A fan fiction by Nyarlathotep.

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Chapter One – When Harry Met Mars



During the summer holidays the mornings were Harry's favorite part of the day. One reason was that his relatives almost always slept later than him so the house on Four Privet Drive was peaceful. Another was that his mail, which came via owl post, usually arrived in the mornings and his best friend Ron Weasley had written him the last two days. Lastly, the heat wave and drought that started last summer had not ended so the mornings were the only nice time of the day.

It is not normal for fifteen-year-old boys in Little Whinging to enjoy getting up early. It is even less normal for them to get their friend's letters via owl post. But when your name is Harry Potter, very few things about you are normal. Harry Potter, you see, is a wizard. But even for a wizard, Harry was hardly normal. Most fifteen-year-old wizard

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boys had not fought off Voldemort, the greatest dark sorcerer in over a century, even once, much less the four times that Harry had. Most fifteen-year-old wizard boys were not world-famous like Harry; and none of them, as far as Harry knew, had a scar in the shape of a lightning bolt like he did. It was a mark Voldemort gave him at their first meeting and it was equally famous.

Harry had been on summer holiday for three days and he was not enjoying it. This too made Harry different from most fifteen-year-olds. He much preferred school to being on holiday. This is because he lived with his muggle relatives. Muggles were people who had no magical talent at all, and his Uncle Vernon had to be about the most muggily muggle in the world. He had gone to live with his relatives when he was just a baby because Voldemort had murdered his parents and these muggles were his only living relatives.

The Dursleys—Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia and his cousin Dudley—didn't look like relatives of Harry. While Harry was small and a bit skinny, Uncle Vernon and Dudley were both large and barrel chested. Neither had much of a neck. His Aunt Petunia, however, had a very long neck. In fact she was horse-faced and, unlike her son and husband, very thin and bony.

Normally they were quite mean to him, or on better days they pretended that he didn't exist. Since he had been home this summer, however, his Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had been formally polite and his normally bullying cousin Dudley had been downright friendly. Harry was not sure if he liked this change or not. He knew they were only acting this way because Mad-Eye Moody had threatened them. Moody was a retired auror with a spooky magical eye and a reputation for jinxing anything that moved so threats from him were generally taken seriously. It was nice to eat dinner without being insulted or watch the news without being stared at, but every moment with his aunt and uncle felt tense. Every minute spent with a friendly Dudley felt surreal. Harry was sure if

he spent the whole summer on Privet Drive he would be insane before he started his sixth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Hogwarts was the best magic school in the world and Harry had enjoyed the greatest times of his life there. But many parts of his fifth year at Hogwarts had not been so great. His headmaster Dumbledore—the greatest wizard of modern times, whom Harry had always trusted more than anyone—kept him in the dark for virtually the whole school year. Harry had been frustrated and angry most of the time. Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix was largely filled with Harry's favorite witches and wizards in the world, but Harry felt that the way they had dealt with him had been patronizing. The order was dedicated to thwarting Voldemort's return to power. They would not even have known of his return had it not been for Harry, and yet he was still banned from its membership and its meetings.

Then, once school had actually started, the Ministry of Magic took it over, Dumbledore had fled and was wanted by the Ministry, and the new headmistress was so horrible to Harry that she had actually become Harry's least favorite person at Hogwarts – incredibly passing Professor Snape, the potions master. She had tortured him, forbidden him his favorite activities (among them a life ban on playing Quidditch), drove off his favorite teacher Hagrid, and made Hogwarts simply a dreadful place to be. But all of those lousy things paled in comparison to seeing his godfather Sirius Black murdered by Bellatrix Lestrange.

Harry Potter had few things in common with most fifteen-year-old boys, but at this moment there was something that made him brothers with boys all across the globe.

"GIRLS!" Harry exclaimed. "Do they ever make up their minds? Do they act this way just to drive us mad?"

Harry had received his mail, but he didn't get just his normal regimen of the Daily Prophet, the most popular newspaper in Wizarding Britain, and a scrawled note from Ron

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talking about quidditch strategy. This morning he got a letter from Cho Chang. She was the only girl he had ever kissed. Until their last row Harry's insides had done flips every time he had seen her. However, her constant dwelling on her previous boyfriend's death had really gotten him down. She cried no matter what he said or did. How are you supposed to deal with that? Hermione thought he had been insensitive, but Harry thought differently. He thought girls were simply insane. Better yet, they were trying to drive him insane. Cho's letter was further proof of his theory.

Dear Harry,

I am writing to express my deepest sympathies for the passing of your godfather. You have suffered through so much in your life. It is simply not fair for this to have happened to you. I did not realize how much stress you were under last year and I just want to take this opportunity to apologize for making it worse. Please find it in your heart to forgive me.

Please write to me and tell me how you feel. I already miss you dreadfully.

X0X0X

Love from Cho

"I miss you dreadfully?" Harry mulled. "Is that why you were going out with Michael Corner just last week? Is that why you didn't look at me the last month we were in school?" Thirty minutes ago Cho was the furthest thought from Harry's mind. Now she haunted him again. Maybe she really didn't know how stressed he was. But that would be pretty thick, Harry thought. Hadn't she seen what Umbridge put him through? Did she care? Well, the letter said she did.

"Girls!" muttered Harry again.

His thoughts had now gone full circle.

"I'll show this to Hermione and see if she can make sense of it," said Harry as he

turned to Hedwig, his beautiful snowy owl. “Girls *obviously* speak in some language only they can understand. It'd be a lot easier for everyone if they just used English, you know!” Harry added with a raised voice.

Hedwig did not answer him—which was probably for the best, because Harry's mood was quite sour. The mornings were normally when Harry was at his happiest, so it was a bad omen to be so mad this early.

Thinking it would be best just to stay in his room all day, Harry decided to skip breakfast and brood instead. At first he was depressed because his foolhardiness had led to Sirius Black's death. After an hour of silent tears for Sirius, his thoughts turned to the cheery subject of Voldemort's return. The war that he had expected would start last year surely must be in its first stages now. Harry figured it would begin with disappearances and then maybe muggle killings, ending with assaults on the Ministry itself—maybe even Hogwarts. Normally a school would not seem of any military value, but Hogwarts was considered the safest place in Britain during the last war and people always said that Dumbledore was the only wizard Voldemort really feared. These two things made Harry feel Voldemort would make Hogwarts his ultimate prize, because its symbolic value would be enormous.

Harry knew he was safe in the Dursley's house. Dumbledore had fashioned a protective ward based on the protection his mother had given him as a baby. His mother had sacrificed her life, using some very old magic, to keep him alive when Voldemort attacked Harry when he was only a year old. His Aunt Petunia was his mother's sister, and Petunia's blood relation to his mother allowed Dumbledore to fashion the ward. As long as Harry could call this blood relation's home his own, Harry was protected from Voldemort while he was there. Being trapped but safe seemed worse than being at risk and doing something useful in the fight against Voldemort. Sirius must have felt this way at 12 Grimmauld Place last year. The thought of Sirius plunged Harry back into tears

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again.

By six o'clock Harry's eyes had cleared enough for him to face his relatives for dinner. He trudged downstairs and did his best to return Dudley's smile as he walked into the kitchen. He still wasn't sure he liked Dudley being nice to him, but any smile at this point was good for Harry's morale. He ate dinner quietly, only talking to answer the pointless questions his aunt and uncle asked him in order to keep up their facade of being polite to him. This pattern continued for the next four days.

During those four days only three items of importance happened to Harry. The first item was that Harry got a letter from his second best friend, Hermione Granger, saying she was going on holiday to the beaches and mountains of California in America next week. She was very excited because the American wizards had a unique style of magic which blended the European and Native arts together. She was most happy, however, over the status of house-elves there. She said two of the seven clans that governed North American wizards had freed their house-elves recently. The last foot and a half of her letter was talking about the impact of this news on S.P.E.W. and Harry barely skimmed it.

The second item was that the next day Harry received another letter from Ron that contained more than just Quidditch talk. Ron told Harry that his oldest brother Bill was getting married to Fleur Delacour late that summer and that Harry was expected to attend. Fleur was the champion of Beauxbatons, the famous French Wizarding School, whom he had competed against in the Triwizard Tournament in his fourth year, and she was almost impossibly beautiful.

The third item was a parcel from Remus Lupin, his third year Defense Against Dark Arts teacher, that contained a letter and an album of snaps of Harry's parents, Sirius, and Lupin himself. Harry really liked it.

Harry had now been on holiday for a week and he was bored out of his skull. Most years he could have thrown himself into his summer reading to pass the time and really

impress Hermione. She was the top student in his year and was always fussing at him to study more. However, because he had just completed his OWL testing (Ordinary Wizarding Levels) and had not received his marks, he had no idea what subjects Hogwarts would allow him to study in his sixth year. He had no summer assignments yet.

Out of boredom, Harry took to wandering some of the same haunts as last year's miserable summer: the playpark, the town center and now he added the video arcade. Never before had Harry enough muggle money to even think about going to the arcade. His cousin's friendly mood had not only continued after Harry's first week home, but had enhanced itself and Dudley had given Harry part of his large allowance.

The other neighborhood kids all kept a safe distance from Harry. He was known as "that no-good Potter kid," as everyone thought he actually attended St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys instead of Hogwarts. Harry used to be offended when people thought this of him, but because it made muggles leave him alone and he didn't feel remotely social he now actually appreciated the reputation.

After spending about a third of the money Dudley had given him, Harry left the arcade for home. He wasn't sure if his cousin would be so friendly next week and he wanted to have enough money to be able to buy muggle newspapers just in case. Harry took his familiar path home, which lead him over the locked gates of the playpark and down Magnolia Road. He then turned onto Magnolia Crescent and headed for the alleyway that would lead him to Wisteria Walk, which connected to Privet Drive, or Prison Drive as Harry liked to think of it.

As he entered the alleyway Harry thought he heard voices up ahead. One of the voices sounded familiar: it sounded like the Death Eater who had begged for mercy from Voldemort at the graveyard last year. Harry froze and reached for the wand that was tucked into his waistband. Only now did he realize that this was the exact alleyway in which he was ambushed last summer by Dementors. As his hand was about to touch his

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wand he heard a familiar voice yell from behind him:

“Hit the deck, Harry!” shouted the female voice. “STUPEFY!”

Harry surprised himself by following the order perfectly. He dove to the ground and after he landed drew out his wand. He lifted his head from the pavement and stared down the alleyway, looking for foes. He saw three figures in robes with masks. He instantly recognized them as Death Eaters. “Death Eater” was what Voldemort's followers called themselves, and Harry had witnessed first-hand how they dressed two years ago at a profane ceremony that had given Voldemort a new body.

A red beam shot out from behind Harry toward the masked men in the alleyway. One of the figures moved his arm in an arc and cried “Protego!” The red beam bounced off the shield that was created and hit the brick wall, causing pieces of it to fall to the ground. All three figures yelled “Stupefy!” and red stunners streaked across the alleyway. Harry turned his head and saw an old woman in a paisley dress produce a shield with her wand that blocked one of the stunners, but the other two knocked her back ten feet and she lay motionless on the ground. Harry jumped up and started to cast a silence spell on the three Death Eaters, but one of them hit him with a disarming spell before he could get the words out. His wand went flying into the air and he flew backwards, hitting the pavement hard.

“Well, well, Potter,” said one of the masked men. “An auror in an invisibility cloak guarding your every move? Dumbledore must really love you.”

Harry was still having a hard time breathing because of the disarming spell so he could not answer the insult. He then heard an odd music piping into the alleyway. It reminded him of the phoenix music that he had heard from Dumbledore's pet Fawkes, but it was different. It was faster, and instead of eerie it sounded clashing, almost a cacophony of notes. While the phoenix music had made him feel safer and calmer, this music made him feel brave and violent. Harry gazed up and saw what look like a very

large bat fluttering around the alley. The music seemed to be coming from it. The Death Eaters had also heard the music and two were pointing their wands at the bat, about to hex it, when a figure entered the alley and jumped over Harry.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you,” the figure boomed. Harry had no idea who he was, but the man was VERY tall—in fact, Harry had never seen anyone except Hagrid who was taller. He was dressed in a brown leather jerkin, brown leather trousers, and high black boots. The tall man landed in front of Harry, pulled out his wand, and started moving it in an arc.

The three Death Eaters all yelled “Stupefy!” again and red stunners streamed at the tall man in the alleyway. To Harry's astonishment, the wand that had been in the man's hand was now a fiery white sword. The gleaming weapon lit up the darkness of the alleyway and Harry noticed the man's jacket was covered in charms and talismans and that his hair was long and quite dark. The tall figure moved his sword like a wand, as though he were a wizard casting the shield spell, and the sword deflected all three of the stunners toward the rightmost Death Eater, who fell when the red beams hit him. The harsh music continued to grow louder and faster. Harry's breath was back and he now felt as though he could easily defeat the three Death Eaters on his own.

“Displacio!” cried the tall man, and tiny deep red globes flew out of his sword and spread out in every direction. He was moving the sword about like a wand as his spell continued. The globes filled the alleyway and hit the two standing Death Eaters, ripping them into the air and smashing them into the brick walls of the alley. The globes whirled like a tornado as they flung the robed figures at a torrid pace. Again and again, their bodies bounced off the walls, and Harry winced at the sounds of bones crunching. After about ten seconds, the tall man lowered his wand—which was no longer a sword—and the bodies crashed to the ground. The music had faded, and Harry noticed that the large bat was nowhere to be seen.

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“Three Death Eaters sent to kill a single teenager while two people secretly follow him? You must feel pretty special, partner!” the man said in an odd, drawling accent. He was smiling, and held his hand out to help Harry up.

Harry stayed on the ground. He was certainly grateful that this bloke had saved him from the Death Eaters, but he wasn't ready to touch him. He stared up at the man distrustfully.

“I see ole Mad-Eye has taught you to suspect everyone. Even someone who has just saved your life,” drawled the man. “That's a smart play for a marked man like you, Harry.” He was still smiling at Harry.

His drawl was nothing like Draco Malfoy's. There was something familiar about it, though. He sounded a bit like the people Harry had seen on the American TV show Gunsmoke.

“Are you an American?” asked Harry, breaking the silence.

“Texan, Harry. But my mom was English and so is half of my family,” the man answered.

“Why were you following me? Did Dumbledore send the both of you?” Harry asked.

“I didn't start out following you, Harry. I wanted to find you and talk to you. However, I noticed her,” the Texan pointed at the witch on the ground, “tailing you and I was curious about what she was doing. I don't know who she is but I can tell that she is a Metamorphmagus. They're pretty rare. It shouldn't be too hard to place her, eh? Do you know any who are also aurors?”

“Tonks!” said Harry. “Yes, I know her. I didn't recognize her, but I guess that's the point.” Harry wondered how this man could tell someone was a Metamorphmagus by sight.

The man's smile grew. “So, is she in Dumbledore's Order?”

Harry was shocked. This man knew about the Order of the Phoenix and was asking about it. Harry certainly was not going to give away any secrets about the Order. Harry was not sure how to answer him, but the man spared him by speaking again.

“Still careful, are you? Well, I'm impressed. How about I rephrase the question? Do you think she was trying to help by following you? Is it a good idea to revive her without binding her?” asked the tall man.

“Oh yes, Tonks is my friend. I can't see her ever trying to harm me,” said Harry as he stood up.

“Good. Get your wand and hold it tight,” said the man.

Harry reached down and picked up his wand from the pavement.

The man raised his wand, said, “Accio wands!” and the three Death Eaters' and Tonks' wands all flew into his hands. Harry felt his tug a bit, but he held it tightly.

“Aurors have a tendency to be a bit jumpy after they've been knocked out. Especially when it's some stranger waking them up,” said the man with a grin. “I think we'll give her her wand back after she knows the score, shall we?” The man then held Tonks' wand in his left hand and put the other three into a pouch that hung from his belt.

Harry nodded. He too thought she would be pretty jinx-happy when she regained consciousness. He moved near Tonks and positioned himself so she would see him when she awoke.

The man pointed his wand at Tonks and said, “Ennervate!”

Tonks opened her eyes and saw Harry. She looked a bit dazed, but then her eyes moved to the tall man and she rolled over quickly and jumped in front of Harry protectively. She stumbled a bit as she stood in front of him.

“Harry, stay behind me! Where's my wand?” she said quickly.

“I've got it, Tonks. And I'll give it back once you've calmed down. I understand you're bit jumpy now; I would be, too. However, you need to realize that the three thugs

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who attacked you and Harry have been dealt with. We're all friends here,” said the man.

“Is that true, Harry? Do you know him?” she asked.

“Well, he certainly dealt with the Death Eaters,” said Harry, pointing to the bodies lying in the alleyway, “but I've never seen him before in my life. I don't even know his name.”

“Oh yeah! I guess that was really rude,” the man drawled. “My name is Mars, and I'm very glad to meet both of you. I can assure you that I am here to help. Professor Dumbledore told me that he notified his Order of my coming.”

“Oh, you're *Mars*,” said Tonks. “He did tell us, but I didn't think you would be so young ... and tall.”

“What *did* he say about me?” asked Mars. He looked at Harry.

“To me?” asked Harry. “No one's told me anything. They never do. I had no idea Tonks was even following me.” Harry's bitter tone was very evident.

“I thought she said Dumbledore mentioned it to the Order?”

“I am not *in* the Order,” said Harry, sounding very bitter.

“What?” exclaimed Mars. “What's the point of that? I figured you'd be the most important part of the Order!” Mars gave Tonks an astonished look. “Well?”

“Well, he's too young. It's too dangerous for him,” stammered Tonks. She looked quite uncomfortable.

Harry scowled at her. Too dangerous, he thought. His life lately had been almost nothing but dangerous bits separated by boring bits.

Mars seemed to agree. “Dangerous? Haven't you folks noticed Harry's been attacked by Voldemort personally each of the last two years? How can you get in more danger than that?”

“It wasn't my decision, Mars. I just try to help out,” said Tonks desperately.

“Well. I can see there'll have to be a few changes now that I'm back in Britain. It's

apparent very little has been learned since the last war.

“Tonks, one of those scumbags is still alive. Since you're an auror, I'll leave him in your custody. I'd like to walk Harry home and chat with him for a bit,” said Mars, in a tone that suggested he was used to people doing exactly what he wanted.

“But I am not supposed to leave Harry –,” argued Tonks.

“Please, Tonks, I don't think there's anything out there that Harry and I together can't handle, okay?” Mars cut her off. He smiled again at Harry and this time, Harry returned the smile.

“But Dumbledore will kill me if I leave Harry. I just can't,” pleaded Tonks.

“Nonsense!” interrupted Mars. “Dumbledore brought me all the way from Texas specifically to see Harry. He told you I could be trusted, didn't he?”

“Yes, he said he trusts you with his life,” Tonks breathed.

“Isn't that good enough for you?” Mars grinned broadly.

The large bat that Harry had seen flying around the alleyway had returned and was swooping down at Mars. About ten feet before it reached him Harry saw it transfigure itself into a small woodpecker which landed on Mars' shoulder and rubbed against his ear affectionately.

In the end, Tonks relented and went to collect the still unconscious Death Eater while Harry and Mars continued down the alleyway towards Wisteria Walk. Harry was starting to like Mars, even though he knew very little about him. Professor Moody would not approve, but if Dumbledore trusted Mars with his life that had to count for something. Besides, Mars seemed like he might actually give Harry information, and Harry was willing to risk anything not to feel so cut off.

“So, how long have you known Dumbledore?” asked Harry.

“All my life, Harry. I went to Hogwarts, you know.”

At that moment, Harry realized how odd Mars would appear to any of his

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neighbors if they happened to look out their window and see all seven feet (well, almost) of him walking around in leather armor and covered in charms.

“Mars, I don't want to offend you or anything, but muggles—at least British muggles—are not used to seeing people walking around in armor with large knives on their hips,” Harry said tentatively.

“Your point is well taken, Harry. However, muggles can't see me unless that is what I wish. Sorta like the Knight bus. When you are with me, it also applies to you,” said Mars.

“Seriously?” asked Harry excitedly. “We're invisible to them right now?”

“And inaudible. When I do allow muggles to see me, I appear in fitting attire, instead of the combat gear that you see. It wouldn't do for me to be scaring the poor muggles each time I came to see you, would it?” asked Mars.

“Wow,” exclaimed Harry. He paused. “Did Dumbledore want you in Britain to help fight Voldemort?” He noticed Mars didn't bat an eyelash at the sound of the name.

“I don't think there's any way I would have been invited back to Britain unless he needed help with Tom Riddle,” said Mars. “I have a very bad reputation in the UK, you see. Even by the people who really like me, I'm often seen as a bit of a loose cannon or even a double-ended wand.”

“Why do you call Voldemort by his real name like that?” asked Harry.

“Three reasons, Harry. One, he is not the Lord of anything. I have no respect for him, so I don't plan on using his fake respectful title. Two, I know how much he hates muggles. He tries desperately to cover up that his father was one. Using his muggle name, I am sure, ticks him off. And three, it is his real name,” answered Mars firmly.

“When they met a few weeks ago, Dumbledore also called him Tom,” said Harry.

“You'll find that he and I have a lot in common, Harry.”

Harry noticed that they were almost at his aunt and uncle's house. “So I'll be seeing

you again, I take it?" he asked.

"You can count on that, Harry," answered Mars. "Tell me, have you received your OWL results yet?"

Harry was surprised to hear such a question. Why would Mars switch subjects like that? Harry dreaded seeing his scores in History of Magic, Divination and Astronomy.

"No, they won't be in for a few more weeks, I think," Harry answered.

"Ah, good," said Mars. "It's been a while since I took mine; I had forgotten how long it takes to grade them," he added quickly. "Well, I'll see you in a few days. I promise not to let them make you stay with these muggles much longer. I'm sure I can change Dumbledore's mind."

Harry waved and Mars disappeared with a *crack*. Mars' last comment had really cheered Harry up. Anything that got him back into the wizarding world faster was good as far as Harry was concerned. Moody might be mad at him for trusting Mars so quickly, but so far Mars was hard not to like. Harry went upstairs to bed with a spring in his step that he had not had in a very long time.

Chapter Two – Dudley's Surprise



Harry was outside sitting on a bench in Aunt Petunia's flower garden. The afternoon was hot, but there was a slight breeze and Harry felt the best that he ever had while being on Privet Drive. It had been two days since he had met the American wizard named Mars, and Harry had been reliving in his mind the half hour or so he had spent with Mars. Mars had claimed that he had seen Tonks tailing Harry, but she had been wearing an invisibility cloak. He must be able to see through them like Mad-Eye or Dumbledore. Then there was that odd globe spell, what had he said? Something like "Displaseol?" It certainly had been effective and Harry was sure he had never seen nor heard of anything like it. He made a mental note to add this to the list of things to ask Hermione about. Then Mars claimed that he and Harry had been invisible to muggles when they were walking home together. Harry had been invisible many times before and

it had never been like that night. However, Harry figured that him not being a muggle must have had something to do with it. Other wizards must be able to do that. He made another note to himself to ask Mr. Weasley or Professor Lupin about it.

Harry noticed his cousin Dudley approaching him from the house. Dudley smiled at him and Harry returned it for the first time without forcing himself. Dudley had continued to be friendly and even managed not to be annoying while doing it. Harry was still astonished at the turn in Dudley's character, but he figured it was best to try to keep things friendly.

“Harry, I have something to show you. I think it's going to really surprise you. In fact, I think I'll warn you to brace yourself,” Dudley said, almost giggling.

“Okay, Dudley, let's see it,” said Harry in his most friendly voice.

Dudley pulled an envelope out of his pocket. The paper looked very expensive and it had beautifully written letters on the front and a gorgeous wax seal on the back. The front read as follows:

To:
Mr Dudley Dursley
The Nicest Bedroom
4 Privet Drive
Little Whinging
Surrey

From:
Olympe Maxime
Headmistress
Beauxbatons Academy of Magic
For Students Over the Traditional Age
France

Harry nearly dropped the letter in shock. His hands shook. He looked up at Dudley

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and could only squeak, “You?”

“Me.”

“A wizard?”

“Yep. Amazing, isn't it? They said in the letter than numerous muggleborns are not discovered until later in life, and many turn into great wizards and witches.” Dudley tapped his chest with pride.

Hearing Dudley say muggleborns, witches, and wizards in the same sentence was more than Harry's grip on reality could take, and he promptly fainted and fell off the back of the bench. Harry woke to his cousin gently sprinkling water on him from a glass.

“Harry, are you all right? I did warn you to brace yourself, you know,” said Dudley.

Harry sat up and rubbed the back of his head where it had hit the ground and looked at his cousin in a new light.

“I know you warned me, but that was quite a shocker,” said Harry woozily.

“You should have seen me when I got it. I don't think I said a word for twelve hours. It took me three days before I showed it to my parents,” replied Dudley.

“I bet they just loved that!” said Harry as he imagined his aunt and uncle's faces.

“It took them two hours of crying and rereading the letter before they would believe it. They went to bed two days ago refusing to accept it and then the next morning they came around and realized it made sense,” said Dudley.

“Made sense?” asked Harry.

“Well, I've always been terrible at muggle schools. Now we know the reason. It was those stupid muggles bringing me down the whole time. I'm sorry I didn't realize how they must have made you feel when you went to muggle schools. Sorry I was part of it. But now I know who the scum of the earth are. Filthy muggles! Anyway, sorry, Harry,” said Dudley.

Harry was shocked. It seemed that Dudley had moved from one form of bigotry to another. He struggled to find words with which to answer Dudley. He didn't want to cause trouble, but Harry was still having difficulty accepting that this conversation was real and not another weird dream.

“D-don't worry about it, Dud. I un-understand that they forced you to be that way. And congratulations on being accepted into Beauxbatons; it is a world-renowned school. I met the Headmistress and she is v-very impressive,” stammered Harry.

“You've met her? She must be the best headmistress in the world. Soon I'll be a powerful wizard and all those teachers who failed me will pay!” exclaimed Dudley.

Dudley named a few more muggles that would suffer his wrath and asked Harry if he would like to go out for pizza the next evening. Harry was very reluctant, but because he was still in shock he agreed to go with Dudley. His cousin left the garden to go inside. After coming mostly out of his daze, Harry also went into the house and up to his room.

Harry's head was swimming. There was a logic to it, but not one he liked very much. His mother was muggleborn and he knew muggleborns at Hogwarts who had other family members become wizards, so it wasn't unprecedented for Dudley to have become a wizard, just unnerving. Harry thought that he'd remembered Hermione saying something about the French wizarding school having a program for late-developing witches and wizards. It was, however, one of those times that he and Ron had merely mumbled “yes” or “okay” to whatever Hermione had been going on about. They'd had no interest in what she was saying, but didn't want to set her temper off. Harry now really wished he had listened. Harry racked his brain for an hour or so about the situation before his aunt called him down for lunch.

As Harry entered the kitchen, he noticed his uncle and cousin were grinning and staring blankly ahead with their hands placed flat on the table. As soon as Harry walked in, however, they started conversing with each other.

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Aunt Petunia greeted him while she stirred a pot on the stove. “Oh, come in, Harry dear. We're having Diddy's and your favorites today to celebrate his acceptance into Beauxbatons.”

“Harry dear?” he thought. That sounded like Mrs. Weasley, not Aunt Petunia. Harry sat down at the table and Dudley smiled at him. Harry did his best to return the smile and then looked at his plate to avoid his relatives' glances. Even though everyone was polite and the food was very good, it seemed like one of the longest lunches Harry had ever endured.

The Dursleys were quite accepting of wizards now that their son was one, and they kept asking Harry questions about Madame Maxime and Beauxbatons. Harry did his best to get through the questions as fast as he could without being rude, all the while eating quickly. When he finally left the kitchen and went upstairs to his room he was sweating from the stress.

The world seemed upside down. Harry really needed some advice but he wasn't sure who he should ask. Ron didn't know the first thing about muggles, so there was no point in asking him. Hermione was on holiday in California, and Harry couldn't see asking Hedwig to fly halfway across the world. Besides, he already knew what she would say: “Let me look up a few things in *Magical Maladies Among Muggles*, and in the meantime I think you should write to Dumbledore and tell him everything.” Harry could just see her now fussing at him. He smiled at the thought and then realized that the imaginary Hermione had a good point. Writing to Dumbledore made sense. He was the one who made sure Harry stayed with his relatives each summer. If something were wrong he would want to know.

Harry went over to his desk and started thinking of what he wanted to tell Dumbledore and how to say it. Mad-Eye Moody last year, and Professor Lupin in his letter that contained the photo album, had both warned Harry not to send anything

revealing via Owl Post, so writing the letter was tough. He had written his godfather Sirius a letter last year using code words that only Sirius would understand. It had worked very well, so Harry tried to do the same thing with Dumbledore's letter, but he was failing. Nothing he wrote made any sense. Harry had started and then tossed five letters in the bin before he threw down his quill in disgust. He then thought if Dumbledore received an incoherent letter from him maybe he would be concerned enough to visit. That was it! What Harry really needed was a visit from one of the members of the Order.

Harry heard a knock at his door and then his aunt's voice. "Harry, you have a visitor downstairs."

"Thanks, Aunt Petunia, I'll be right down," said Harry quickly.

It must be Mars, he thought. He had said he would be coming to visit soon. Surely Mars had joined the Order by now! Why else would he have come all the way from Texas? Harry jumped up, put on his trainers and trotted down the stairs. He saw Mars, still dressed in his leathers and charms, chatting up Uncle Vernon like they were business partners. Harry thought about Mars' remark that muggles saw him as he wished and thought that Mars must look quite different to his aunt and uncle right now. Even though they had accepted that their son was going off to wizard school in the fall, he doubted they would feel comfortable with the long knife in its scabbard on Mars' right hip. Mars greeted Harry with his light blue eyes and a bright smile.

"How are you doing, Harry? I was telling your charming family that I had just come from the Ministry to discuss your career when you leave Hogwarts," he said, beckoning Harry to his side.

Harry thought that Mars' cover story was pretty lame, but then he figured muggles would fall for it and walked over to him. Mars shook his hand, squeezing it tightly. He let go of Harry's hand and continued. "I was hoping to discuss it over dinner. Does that suit you?" Mars' eyes were fixed on Harry's.

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“Yes, that's excellent,” said Harry eagerly.

Mars did a fine job cutting the conversations off, so Harry and he were leaving for dinner within a few minutes.

“Have a nice evening, Harry,” said Aunt Petunia as they left.

They walked outside and when they heard the door close Mars spoke first.

“I thought your family was supposed to be all nasty and hate everything magic, Harry?”

“They were until this summer. Mad-Eye Moody scared them into to being nice to me, but Dudley has been downright friendly,” answered Harry.

They were now approaching the largest SUV that Harry had ever laid eyes on. “Is that yours?” asked Harry in surprise.

“Yeah, I don't really like it. I'm sweet on Italian sports cars myself, but from what I heard about your uncle he seems the type to judge a man by the size of his car. So I figured I would buy the largest American vehicle I could find,” said Mars, looking slightly embarrassed.

They climbed into the Hummer and Harry noticed that like many of the vehicles owned by wizards the inside was larger than the outside, which was really saying something about this behemoth. As they headed down the street, Mars asked, “Do you like pizza, Harry?”

“I do, but my cousin is taking me out for pizza tomorrow. How about Indian food?” said Harry.

“That's fine with me. Your folks sure aren't acting like I thought they would. Dudley taking you out for pizza simply doesn't fit according to Dumbledore's description,” said Mars, looking perplexed.

“It's the first time he has ever offered. He wants to celebrate his acceptance into Beauxbatons,” said Harry.

Instantly Harry slammed forward and his seat belt dug into his chest as Mars hit the brakes hard. Several cars honked at them as they passed the now totally motionless SUV.

“Your cousin got accepted into Beauxbatons Academie de Magique? Where Madame Maxime is the headmistress?” asked Mars incredulously.

“Yeah. I can't believe it either. He showed me the letter this afternoon. I literally fainted, Mars,” said Harry in an equally astonished voice. “I'm still in shock.”

“Harry, your cousin is a muggle. There's no way he got accepted into Beauxbatons,” said Mars as he started forward again.

“But I saw the envelope and he was speaking like a wizard. He was putting down muggles, he used the word muggleborn and was talking about hexing people,” replied Harry with disgust.

“Let's finish this conversation in the restaurant, Harry. I'm still getting used to driving on the left side of the road again,” said Mars. He seemed to be concentrating very hard. Probably on the road, Harry figured.

They drove up to the restaurant and went inside. They got a secluded booth and both ordered curries. When the waiter walked away, Mars looked at Harry, his bright blue eyes blazing, reached a long arm across the table, put his hand on Harry's shoulder and asked him to describe his interactions with his family the last two weeks.

Harry immediately felt much of his tension melt away. He relaxed and leaned back on his bench and Mars took his hand away and also leaned back. Harry told him calmly all of the events that had happened to him since he returned home from Hogwarts. To his surprise, Harry even mentioned the letter from Cho and how it made him feel. It took about fifteen minutes or so for Harry to recap the his summer holiday. Mars sat listening very attentively and staring straight into Harry's eyes the entire time. When Harry had finished, their food had arrived and Mars suggested they eat.

The conversation was light while they ate. Mars asked about Harry's friends,

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especially the Weasleys. He was also interested in which teachers and subjects Harry liked. Harry was very glad to hear Mars didn't like Severus Snape any more than Ron and he did. Apparently, Snape had taken over as Potions Master in the middle of Mars' years at Hogwarts.

“That sorry S.O.B. spent more time putting down Gryffindors than he did teaching,” Mars said as he finished his gulab jamun.

“He still does. He seems to especially hate me, Ron and Neville,” said Harry, enjoying the Snape bashing.

“That's not surprising. He and your father sure hated each other and he always tried to make Bill, Charlie and I miserable. But we always got the best of him when we were his students,” said Mars nostalgically. “As vindictive and twisted as he is, I don't doubt he would hold grudges against you and Ron for your blood relations. He probably hates Neville because his parents put so many of his buddies in Azkaban.”

“So you knew Charlie and Bill Weasley?” Harry asked in surprise.

“Of course I did. They were my best friends at Hogwarts. Bill and I were in the same year, and Charlie was two years behind.”

“Then you also knew that Snape was a Death Eater? I thought they tried hard to cover that up,” Harry blurted.

“I got around even as a kid, Harry. We now need to turn to more current events. I've had enough time to think about what you've told me and there's only one logical choice of action. We need to get you out of Privet Drive as soon as possible,” said Mars seriously.

“Fine by me!”

“There is simply no way that your cousin is a wizard. As you know, muggles see me as I wish, and I figured a real boring brown suit with a derby would fit perfectly for your uncle.”

“Good guess, Mars, that's just his style.”

“Well, they seemed to like it. As I was chatting with them, Dudley complimented me on the derby, Harry; only a muggle would have seen it.”

“Then why has he been so nice to me? Where did he get that letter? How in the world did he know what Beauxbatons was? There's no way I would have thought he could even pronounce it.”

“Only one possibility makes sense, Harry. Someone has put the Imperious Curse on him. And probably on your aunt and uncle too,” said Mars grimly.

Harry's stress immediately returned and his mind raced. He should have suspected it. Dudley being nice! Dudley giving him money! Dudley inviting him out for pizza? How stupid could he be? Sirius had warned him that the last time Voldemort came into power people all across the country were controlled under that curse.

“Do you suppose that Dudley is setting me up tomorrow night, then?” asked Harry.

“Quick mind you have, Harry.” Mars looked impressed. “Yes, I am sure of it. Harry, I know how much you resented being caged up last year, and I promise to only do it when absolutely necessary –”

“You want me to hide at Four Privet Drive again, don't you?” Harry frowned. He vividly remembered all those letters last summer telling him not to leave the house. His mood darkened considerably now that Mars sounded just like everyone else had.

“Yes, Harry, I want you to stay inside and not leave the house for any reason at all until you see Dumbledore or I. I mean *only* the two of us. No one else! Not even the Weasleys or Alastor Moody. That bit is very important. You should only have to suffer for two more days, though. Then Dumbledore or I will take you away. To the Burrow, if you like,” answered Mars.

“Really? Are you sure Dumbledore will agree to that?” asked Harry. “Doesn't he want me to stay for a long enough time each year to make his protective ward work?”

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“I no longer trust it, Harry. You are safe inside the house, but you cannot live that way. Especially with your family probably under Riddle's control. No, you must leave within two days. I'll make sure the Weasleys are expecting you, and inform Dumbledore of my decision. You stay inside, in your room as much as you can, and Dumbledore or I will pick you up in two days, after your relatives have gone to bed. Make sure you're packed. Think of some excuse to get out of pizza tomorrow night,” said Mars as he tapped his finger on his chin.

Harry nodded in agreement. Mars was okay again. Two more nights in his room was easy to put up with in order to escape Privet Drive. Still, knowing his family was reporting his moves to Voldemort was very creepy. Mars ordered some food to go to make it easier for Harry to stay in his room and then they headed home.

Mars dropped off Harry in front of Four Privet Drive and drove off. Harry opened the door and walked into the living room. All three of his relatives were there waiting for him. They all greeted him with friendly words and vapid smiles on their faces. As creepy as they had seemed before Mars' revelation, they were now tenfold worse. Harry answered their queries with stock responses and headed upstairs quickly. He wasn't yet up to thinking of an excuse for not going out with Dudley tomorrow. When he reached his room, he grabbed his desk chair and braced it under the doorknob. He really wished he could use magic and lock the door with the Colloportus charm.

Mars had warned him on the way home not to mention anything about the Imperious Curse or his leaving to anyone via owl post. Mars thought it likely that Voldemort's people would try to intercept any letters. In fact, it seemed like Mars didn't want Harry talking to any wizards except Dumbledore or himself. Mars had made Harry promise at least three times on the way home that he wouldn't do either. Harry was starting to get annoyed with all the lecturing. However, he again thought it was a small price to pay to be leaving Privet Drive after only two and a half weeks.

Harry was tired, but he couldn't sleep. He decided to start working on his excuse for not going out with Dudley the next night. He could claim that Mars wanted an example of his knowledge or skills that could be of use to the ministry. Harry figured that a theoretical essay on some magical topic would sound reasonable. That could give him an excuse to stay holed up for days. He decided that the subject should be potions. He didn't like his potions class, but he could write any old rubbish and his family wouldn't have any idea it wasn't a real essay even if they looked it. Ten or so minutes of work could provide an excellent delay of a few days. He grabbed the chair from the door and slid up to his desk. He started writing a few silly things on the parchment. A potion that will turn the drinker into a Crumple-Horned-Snorkack. Yes, that would be hilarious. What should go in it, though? Boomslang skin for sure; maybe belladonna? Harry was thinking on this when he heard a knock at the window.

Harry quickly turned to his window, which was open, and saw Remus Lupin's head and shoulders through it. Harry was speechless. Lupin smiled and greeted Harry warmly.

“Hullo, Harry! I've come to take you back with me.”

Harry managed to say “Hello, Professor.” He paused. “I'm p-leased to see you but, but Mars said I was to go with him in two days.”

“No need, Harry. You can come with us now. It's easier this way.” said Lupin with an odd smile on his face.

“No, I think I should stay. I'm waiting for Dumbledore or Mars. Mars was very insistent,” Harry said firmly. Something was wrong with Lupin. Harry was suspicious.

“Harry, be reasonable. Dumbledore's a busy wizard. Just come with Lucius and I and everything will be fine.” Lupin's weird smile had turned malevolent.

“No!” screamed Harry “You're here with Lucius Malfoy? You're trying to trick me!” He drew his wand, pointed it at Lupin's chest, and cried “Avada Kedavra!” A sick green light flashed out of Harry's wand and hit Lupin in the heart. The evil smile

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disappeared and the familiar caring one that Harry knew so well returned.

Lupin looked at him and said, “Harry, you have killed me and saved me. Thank you.” Lupin's eyes rolled up in his head and he fell backwards away from the window.

Harry screamed, “NO!” He tried to run forward but fell and hit the floor.

Harry snatched his head off the desk quickly. His face was covered in drool and his heart was pounding. The parchment he had been working on was stuck to his cheek. He spun and looked at the window. It was open, but no one was there. His wand was still on his bed table. He pulled the parchment off his face and breathed a sigh of relief. A dream, only a dream. Harry was still shaking a bit. He had suffered many nightmares in his life, but killing his favorite Professor was by far the worst. He wondered if Voldemort was plaguing his dreams again. He sighed, put the chair back under the door knob and went to bed. The rest of his dreams that night were more to his liking.

The next morning Harry got up slowly. He had to screw up his courage for over an hour before he was ready to face his relatives again. He had gone over the lie in his head many times. “Theoretical essay on a potion. Have to do it in three days. This could lead to a top job in the Ministry. I can then go out, Dud, I promise. I'm really sorry. We'll celebrate then,” he rehearsed to himself as he went downstairs, dreading each step. He finally reached the living room and again all three of his relatives smiled at him.

Harry took a deep breath and explained about the imaginary essay he had to write. They were not happy about it all. Dudley complained that Harry rarely spent any time with him since he had gone off to Hogwarts. Uncle Vernon lectured him about putting money and career above family. Aunt Petunia then told him off for worrying about how other people view you. This was all very hard for Harry to take. The only way that Harry got through it was amusing himself on how badly the Death Eaters had messed up. They must have had no idea how unfamilylike Harry's home life really was. Harry figured that he would have known they were under the Imperious Curse by now even without help

from Mars. Finally, after what seemed like hours of complaints, Harry was able to escape upstairs.

Back in the safety of his own room, Harry relaxed, but boredom quickly set in. With boredom become tense and worried again. Once his relatives reported back to Voldemort, would they continue to accept his excuse to be away from them for three days? Harry paced his room for a few hours and fought the urge to use the toilet. He didn't want to risk running into his relatives in the hall. A few hours later, when Harry could stand it no longer, he opened his door, quickly turned towards the bathroom, and almost walked into Dudley.

“Ah,” Harry uttered in surprise. “Didn't see you there, Dud.”

Dudley stared right into his eyes, smiling. “How's the essay coming along, Harry?” he asked.

“The essay? Oh—er, it's coming along okay. It's a lot of reading and figures. I've started it several times. It's, uh, hard work.” Harry answered unconvincingly.

He jumped when two large hands landed on his shoulders from behind. “Essay has got you all tense, eh, Harry?” said Uncle Vernon. He squeezed Harry's shoulders, making Harry nervous. “You should come have some tea with us; it would calm your nerves.”

“Er, no thank you. I really have go and then I have to get back to work. My future career could be at stake.” Harry slithered out of his uncle's grip and hurried into the bathroom.

Harry was relieved to see neither his cousin nor his uncle in the hall when he left the bathroom. He zoomed down the hall to his door. He entered the room and yelped.

“Dudley, you scared the wits out of me!”

Dudley was standing at Harry's desk looking at the fake essay Harry had started.

“You haven't gotten very far have you?” Dudley said suspiciously.

“Well, I restarted. I want to make sure it's perfect,” Harry replied firmly.

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“Are you sure you aren't just making excuses to get out of doing things with your family?” accused Dudley.

“What? Why would I do that?”

“To get even with us for being so mean to you all these years. C'mon Harry, we're really sorry. Let us make it up to you,” Dudley's voice oozed sincerity.

“No, Dudley, really. I just have to finish this essay. In three days I'll be free for the summer,” said Harry desperately.

“Oh all right, but no backing out of it then. Mum and Dad want to go to the amusement park and camping. We'll have a lot of fun, Harry.”

“Course we will, Dud. Now I have to get back to work.”

Dudley left and Harry then laid his head on his desk and sighed. How would he get through thirty more hours of this?

Harry had been sitting there for an hour, staring out the window, when a small woodpecker flew into his room, landed on his desk, and held its leg out. Harry recognized it immediately as the woodpecker he had seen with Mars the night they met. There was a very small note attached to its leg so he removed it. The woodpecker then flew up to the top of his dresser and looked around his room. Harry unrolled the note and it unfolded more and more until it was a parchment that was simply too big to have started out attached to such a small bird.

Dear Harry,

I know I warned you not to send anything important via owl post, but Lilandria here (Lily for short) is perfectly reliable. I have asked her to keep you and your owl company. She is very handy so if you need something, ask her. You would be surprised at what she can do.

The arrangements have been made, but I had to really twist some arms. I will be there late tomorrow night. Sorry you have to suffer one more day.

Sincerely,

Mars

“Hello, Lily! That was my mum's name, you know,” Harry said sadly to the bird.

She flew off the dresser and landed on Harry's shoulder. She nuzzled up to his face just like she had with Mars a few days ago. This made Harry feel much more comfortable and confident. He even felt like he could sleep now, so he put his desk chair back under his doorknob and went to bed. He fell asleep quickly and slept soundly. No more nightmares interrupted his sleep.

Harry dreaded the start of his last day on Privet Drive. Not because he was going to miss the place at all, but because he believed the Dursleys would be harassing him all day. Just the sight of them in the last few days gave Harry the collywobbles. That they were under Voldemort's control was still hard for Harry to accept, but it was starting to sink in. He actually felt some pity for them, especially his cousin. It would be hard not to be a git with parents like Dudley's. Being spoiled like Dudley was exactly what Dumbledore had feared would happen to Harry if he had lived with a wizarding family. Harry was almost thankful for such a rough childhood. Being a spoiled loser like Dudley your whole life sure seemed a lot worse than no birthday cards for eleven years. Now Dudley was certainly suffering his shares of knocks. Last year Dudley had been attacked by Dementors and now this year he was under the Imperious Curse, both because he was related to Harry.

Harry thought about some of the others that had suffered because of their relationship with him. Both of his best friends had been hospitalized while involved in Harry's schemes. Mr Weasley had almost been killed guarding the prophecy about Harry. Ginny and Neville had also been injured because of him. And Cedric Diggory and his godfather Sirius Black had both paid the ultimate price for knowing Harry. Add in the fact that his parents had been murdered by Voldemort as they were trying to protect

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Harry, and the carnage on his account seemed enormous. Being an acquaintance to Harry Potter was not a healthy prospect. He brooded on this subject all morning.

Lilandria seemed to notice his depression and began to sing. Her song was beautiful this time, not the violent cacophony that Harry had heard in the alley. He took heart from the song and felt his confidence grow. This was his last day in exile and then things would change, he thought. He would not let the adult wizards keep him in the dark and treat him like a child anymore. He would insist on being an active part in the war against Voldemort. With any luck, Mars would back him up on this demand. Too many people had suffered trying to protect him.

The rest of the day was more pleasant and passed more quickly. Harry was worried about running into one of his relatives in the hallway on his way to toilet, but Lilandria again was of use. He asked her if she could check to see if the coast was clear. She flew up to the door, landed on the floor and seemed to disappear. Seconds later she reappeared near the same spot; Harry could have sworn she had shrunk in size rather than disappeared. When Harry asked if the coast was clear, she definitely nodded. Harry hurried to the bathroom and back. Later in the evening when Harry had to go again Lilandria made sure the hallway was Dursley free before he opened his door.

Harry's only interaction with his family that day had been Aunt Petunia trying to get him to come downstairs for dinner and lunch. Harry was very worried that they may try to drug him so he politely declined both invitations. After the call for dinner Harry finished his packing. He doubted that the Dursleys would bother him again tonight and he didn't want to risk not being ready when Mars arrived.

Around 10:30 Lilandria started flying around Harry's room and singing quietly. It was her happiest song yet and Harry's morale, which was already high, skyrocketed. He was going to see Ron and Ginny. Trading the Dursleys for the Weasleys was the deal of the century, and Harry felt like a tycoon. After three minutes of Lily's song Harry heard

the familiar *crack* of someone apparating; Mars appeared in the middle of his room. Lily flew to Mars' shoulder and caressed his face. He smiled at Harry and held out his hand.

"Mars!" said Harry, louder than he intended. He shook Mars' hand vigorously. "I'm so glad you're here. It's been so creepy being around them."

"I can imagine," Mars answered sympathetically. "There are holes in every ward, Harry, always remember that. Dumbledore has relied on this protection for too long; a static defense never lasts. The muggles here were always its weakness, but the Death Eaters are too dependent on their master. They didn't have enough initiative to figure out how to exploit them before his return."

"Are the Dursleys going to be all right? It's not that I really like them or anything, but it's not their fault I lived here. Dumbledore didn't give them a choice," said Harry. He couldn't believe he was actually worried about his relatives. Before this summer he would have estimated the chances of his being genuinely concerned about his family as lower than Dudley becoming a wizard.

"After we get you to the Burrow I will come back and reverse the spells. The Imperious Curse is very hard on muggles," said Mars. His face was sad. "Well, let's get moving."

Mars waved his wand and Harry's school things floated out the window.

"Where are the others?" asked Harry.

"What do you mean? The Weasleys are waiting for us at the Burrow."

"I mean the rest of the escort. Last year there were nine wizards and witches with me and even more as rear guards and scouts."

"No need, Harry. You and I won't attract much attention and my truck goes a lot faster than a formation of brooms."

Harry was surprised. When he was moved last year the order was consumed with

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safety precautions, but Mars seemed unconcerned. Harry decided to be unconcerned as well.

The baggage sank gently to the ground outside the window and Mars told Harry to climb on the sill. Mars cast a levitation charm on Harry and he floated to the ground after the baggage. Mars followed suit and they starting walking towards Mars' truck in the distance, with Harry's luggage following.

They had only gone about a hundred feet when Mars swore and spun around, wand in hand.

"Kingsley!" Mars said hotly. "I said the guard was to leave as soon as I arrived. I don't need any flatfoots attracting attention."

"You're by yourself, Harry is not even invisible, and the two of you are walking across a lot that is known to be watched. This is stupid even for you, Mars. How can you put Harry at risk like this?" Kingsley Shacklebolt's voice snarled.

Where Kingsley was standing was a mystery to Harry—he was obviously invisible—but Mars was glaring at a spot a few feet away so Harry looked there also. "Risk? After the bang-up job you all did last year? And you have the gall to chastise me for not being careful with Harry! When the time comes that he is attacked by Dementors, Death Eaters or Tom Riddle himself while he is under my watch, you can lecture me on guarding him. 'Till then, clear off like Dumbledore told you!"

"Just because you're Dumbledore's favorite again doesn't mean you'll always get your way, Mars. You've already worn out your welcome with a lot of us. One more stunt like this, and your stock with him will sink," retorted Kingsley.

"Fine. As I said before, 'till then, clear off," said Mars in a calmer voice.

Crack. Kingsley had obviously apparated.

"C'mon, Harry, let's get in the car. That delay was very irritating."

Harry was used to being called Dumbledore's favorite. It felt odd to hear someone

else being bashed for that. He could not help identifying with Mars.

They got into the truck and started driving down the road. Mars reached down and pressed a familiar looking tiny silver button on the dash. Harry had seen a button like it in the Weasley's Ford Anglia. It was an invisibility booster. The car around them vanished and so, in fact, did they. After they had gained speed on the highway for about twenty seconds, Mars pulled a lever and the Hummer lifted off the ground and into the sky. After they had climbed several thousand feet into the air, Mars pulled another lever and the truck accelerated, pushing Harry briefly back into his seat.

“Wow,” exclaimed Harry. “We're really moving fast.”

“You see why we didn't need an escort?”

“I sure do. Like any broom could keep up with this!”

“Unless the Death Eaters hijacked some Tornado Jet Fighters, we should be plenty safe,” Mars grinned.

As they raced towards the Burrow, Mars and Harry chatted like old friends. Harry felt comfortable telling Mars almost anything. Mars showed great interest in Harry's various adventures, including his run-ins with Voldemort. Talking about such things usually made Harry feel anxious, but talking with Mars seemed to place them in context within the whole of his life and Harry felt a sense of closure.

After a while, Harry asked tentatively, “Did Dumbledore really want me to stay on Privet Drive for a while longer?” Harry also wondered why a nice wizard like Kingsley would be so belligerent to Mars, who was clearly a good wizard who hated Voldemort, but he didn't want to upset Mars.

“At first he was firmly for your staying. I had to show very solid proof that your cousin was under the Imperious Curse before he would agree. Even then, he was still trying to convince me to simply reverse the curse that plagued your family. I had to go to the brink with him before he would agree to let you leave,” said Mars determinedly.

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“What do you mean, go to the brink?”

“Threaten to take your welfare into my own hands.”

Harry was shocked, but managed to ask, “How?”

“I told him I would offer you shelter myself. He knew you would do almost anything to get away from the Dursleys. My place is well protected with wards, and the Fidelius Charm placed upon it has my most trusted colleague as its secret keeper. It is a much more comfortable and interesting place than your uncle's house or the Black's ancestral abode. He knew you would be sorely tempted by my offer, and agreed to let me get you away from Privet Drive,” answered Mars.

“I would have taken you up on the offer. I was going mad in that house.”

“I think in the end he realized that too. I know he feels guilty about how you were treated last year, Harry. He's got a lot on his mind, just like us,” Mars said with his usual grin.

Harry wasn't used to wizards that could threaten Dumbledore and get their way. Even the minister of magic himself, with all his aurors and law enforcement wizards, had only been able to go so far with his demands on Dumbledore. Kingsley must be correct that Mars was indeed Dumbledore's favorite.

“I am afraid I won't be able to see you for a while after I drop you off,” Mars said glumly after a moment.

“Why not?”

“A group of Death Eaters are going to Europe for some reason, and I want to know why. At least six of them will be traveling together; it must be big.”

“Where are they going?”

“Can't tell you, Harry.”

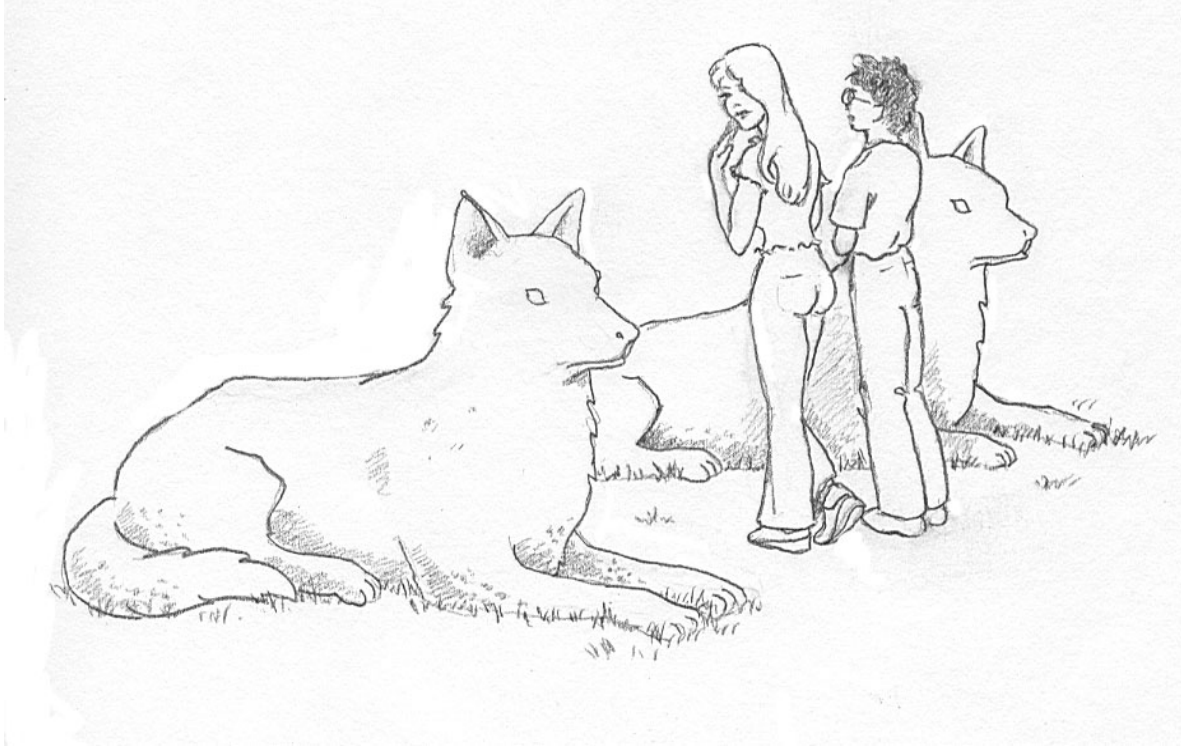
This angered Harry. He had trusted Mars with his life several times and now Mars had started treating Harry like a child. “So you don't trust me either? That's just great,”

said Harry bitterly, leaning back into his seat rather hard.

“It's not like that, Harry. Literally, I can't tell you. I don't know where they're going. I promised you I wouldn't treat you like a baby and I meant it.”

Harry apologized and relaxed again. This was a nice way to travel, he reflected.

Chapter Three – Holiday with the Weasleys



The truck slowed and Harry could feel that they were losing altitude. They landed with a jolt on the same road that he, Fred, George and Ron had used when the Weasley boys had rescued Harry back when he was twelve. Mrs. Weasley had been happy to see him then, but she had gone spare about the method of his delivery to her house. He wondered if the same telling off that the twins and Ron had received was awaiting Mars upon their arrival.

Shortly after landing, Harry and Mars pulled up to the Weasley's yard in the mammoth truck and stopped. It was late, around 10:30, but Bill Weasley and a tall beautiful girl with long blond hair were standing outside waiting for them.

“Wow, Charlie wasn't kidding. Bill's fiancée Fleur is really stunning!” Mars admired Fleur through the windshield.

Harry agreed. Fleur no longer had that haughty look that had made her appear

distant and unapproachable. She was staring at the windshield with a friendly smile.

“She's part Veela, Mars. Her grandmother was one,” said Harry as he opened his door. Mars nodded and they both got out of the truck.

“Airy, it is vairy good to see you!” Fleur exclaimed, swooping down on Harry, kissing him on each cheek and then hugging him.

Mars and Bill shook hands; Bill greeted Harry and then introduced Fleur to Mars. Mars surprised both Fleur and Harry by greeting her in French. Mars and Fleur exchanged some rapid chatter in fluent French, leaving Bill and Harry looking lost.

“You lot stay out here 'till I come back,” said Bill. “I need to tell Mum and Dad that Harry has arrived early. I'm afraid she isn't going to be happy with either of us, Mars,” Bill added apprehensively.

“Oh, I've prepared myself for the tongue-lashing. It's been a while, but I can still remember a few she's given us,” said Mars, trying to look unconcerned. Harry could tell, though, that Mars wasn't looking forward to Mrs. Weasley's telling off.

Bill went inside and Fleur turned to Harry to ask about his holiday. Harry started to tell her about his relatives' enchantment but paused when Mars strode past them, wand in hand. He and Fleur fixed their eyes on Mars as he reached the middle of the yard, pointed his wand about in circles and waves, and cried, “Golemnus Sentinelle!” Slabs of rock began creeping out of the ground and piling up in two places near the front of the yard. When the rock piles, which looked like granite in the moonlight, were each about four feet wide and twelve feet long, they stopped growing and started changing. The granite piles slowly transfigured into huge wolves made of stone. They were lying down but with their heads up, looking alert. Mars walked over to the statues and whispered something into each of their ears and he then called over Harry and Fleur, looking rather pleased with himself.

“What are they, Mars?” Harry asked, impressed.

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“They are guardians. With you here, the Burrow needs a bit more security. These should make life very miserable for any Donnies who dare to show their face,” answered Mars.

“Zey are not normal guardians zoe, are zey?” asked Fleur as she gazed at the wolves.

“That's correct, Fleur; they are much better. A lot more complex than the Gargoyles in front of your headmaster's office,” Mars beamed at Harry. “They should come in very handy –”

“Harry!” squealed Ginny Weasley. Ron's little sister had just come out of the front door in her nightdress and slippers and was running up to Harry. Harry turned and smiled at her just as she reached him throwing her arms around his neck and squeezing him. Harry hugged her back and was surprised at how good it felt. When Ginny let go of him Harry still hugged her for a moment. When he realized what he was doing he quickly released Ginny and put his hands behind his back awkwardly. He was positive he was going pink. Fleur confirmed his suspicion with the smile and wink that she gave him. Harry started to feel less pink and more red.

Ron now also came outside and called to Harry. He shook Harry's hand and clasped him on the back. “All right, mate?”

“It's fab now. But the two and a half weeks on Privet Drive were the weirdest ever,” answered Harry. He now felt at home. Being around Weasleys seemed to always raise his spirits. He started telling Ron about his summer, but Ginny coughed, interrupting him.

“We like our friend Harry very much, but his manners could use some work. My name is Ginny Weasley and this is my brother Ron. Am I right in assuming you are the infamous Mars?”

Ron and Harry's eyes lit up in surprise while Fleur put her hands over her mouth

and suppressed a laugh. Mars, however, looked impressed.

“Infamous?” Mars beamed down at Ginny, who was literally half his size. “Who have you been talking to?”

Before Ginny could answer, however, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had come outside with Charlie and Bill in tow. Both the Weasley parents greeted Harry and Molly fumed over how thin and pale he looked. Harry, however, thought Mrs. Weasley was the one who looked pale and thin. She had always looked plump before, but she now appeared almost slender and very pale. Harry knew how sick with worry she must have been and hid his annoyance with her fussing.

Charlie and Bill now moved to each side of Mars and appeared to be preparing for the assault that they knew their mother was bound to launch. Fleur leaned on Bill's chest as though physically lending him moral support. Mrs. Weasley let go of Harry and turned towards Mars.

“Bringing Harry here without an escort was very dangerous,” accused Mrs. Weasley.

“Molly, we were invisible and flying at 350 miles per hour. How in the world do you suppose Tom Riddle or any of his Donnies were supposed to accost us? The only time Harry was in danger was when Kingsley slowed us up for a few minutes,” replied Mars, who seemed to be trying to keep his tone friendly.

“You still could have had people with you. I know many of us would have volunteered.”

“But that would have delayed Harry's departure for days. You know how Alastor can be. He would have wanted detailed maps of the route with likely ambush points highlighted and other nonsense.”

“What's wrong with that? A few days' delay to ensure his safety.”

“His family was under Voldemort's control, Molly! They were all victims of the

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Imperious Curse. He was not safe there, not at all.”

“No!” she whispered.

“Yes!” Mars, Bill and Harry said in unison.

“They were trying to lure me out to where Voldemort could attack me,” explained Harry. “My cousin Dudley had a fake acceptance letter from Beauxbatons. They had him pretending to be a wizard and acting all friendly so I would trust him.”

Ron, Ginny, and Mr. and Mrs Weasley all gasped in horror. Mrs Weasley looked at Harry with sympathetic eyes, but then she turned on Mars. “We are very glad to have Harry with us, Mars, but if I find out you brought Harry here by yourself because you were trying to bait You-Know-Who out into the open to attack you, I’ll make sure Dumbledore banishes you for life!”

“Mum, be reasonable!” argued Charlie.

“You’ve been listening to Kingsley Shacklebolt too much, Molly. Harry came here the safest possible way,” said Mars. He sounded hurt by the accusations. “I have to leave now and reverse the curse on Harry’s relatives. Bill, I need a word with you, please.”

Bill and Mars walked over to the wolves and spoke quietly.

“What are those statues?” asked Mr. Weasley, breaking the silence.

“Zey aren’t statues Meester Weasley, Mars created special guardians to watch over ze Burrow. I ’ave never seen such a piece of transfiguration,” answered Fleur.

Charlie piped in, “See, Mars is looking out for us. Give him another chance, Mum. No one’s perfect.”

Mrs. Weasley’s only response was a “Hmph.”

Mars and Bill walked back over to the rest of the group. “Goodbye, Harry,” said Mars somberly. “It was wonderful to meet you, Fleur, Ginny and Ron. I’ll let you know how it went when I return.”

Everyone but Mrs. Weasley said goodbye to Mars and he silently walked back to

his truck and left.

“Harry'd be dead without Mars' help, Mum,” said Charlie.

“I don't remember anyone else providing our home with protection,” added Bill.

“That's enough! If you two keep hanging around with that hooligan you'll end up dead or in Azkaban,” shrilled Mrs Weasley. Her eyes were full of tears.

Harry saw Bill and Charlie shaking their heads as they walked behind their mother.

Mrs. Weasley insisted that everyone go straight to bed without talking. Bill transported Harry's things to Ron's room and said goodnight. After Harry changed into his pajamas, he sat down on Ron's bed and they began whispering. Ron had just asked about Harry's first meeting with Mars when his door opened. Harry and Ron both scrambled for their beds before they saw that it was only Ginny entering the room.

Ron, a hand over his heart, whispered angrily, “Ginny, you scared us half to death.”

Ginny ignored her brother's complaint. She walked over to the bed and sat down between Harry and Ron. She said quietly, “We don't have to whisper, I heard Mum and Dad snoring when I listened at their door.” She smiled at both of them. “Start at the beginning, Harry; I want you to tell us everything.”

And that is exactly what he did.

The next morning Harry and Ron were awakened, too early for their tastes, by Mrs. Weasley banging on Ron's door.

“Why's your mum so sore with Mars anyway?” Harry asked, yawning.

“I don't know, but obviously Bill and Charlie do. Bill will have already left for work, but I bet Charlie is still having breakfast. Let's ask him,” Ron suggested eagerly.

They dressed hurriedly and ran downstairs into the kitchen. Charlie was eating breakfast with Ginny and, because there was no sign of Mrs. Weasley, the boys instantly started quizzing Charlie about Mars.

“Mum has been wanting Harry to be here since the beginning of Summer. Why is

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she so annoyed that Mars brought him? Harry said without Mars twisting Dumbledore's arm he'd still be with the muggles,” said Ron.

“Kingsley didn't seem to like him either. Why is that?” added Harry.

“One at a time, lads,” said Charlie with his mouth full. He swallowed and continued. “I don't know why Kingsley doesn't care for him, but Mother hasn't trusted him since I was in my fifth year at Hogwarts and she found a lot of the mischief that Bill, Mars, and me used to get into. She blamed him for everything, said we were perfect angels until that ruffian Mars came along.” Charlie chuckled.

“I thought you guys never got into trouble?” asked Ginny.

“Yeah, Mum always tells us that!” added Ron.

“I said mischief, not trouble, Ginny. Being caught is something the twins and Ron do well; we usually skipped that bit about being caught and concentrated on having fun,” Charlie grinned. “But it wasn't always fun; lots of times Bill and Mars were just interested in learning new things.”

Ron was still frowning at Charlie over the bit about being caught, but Harry was intrigued. He asked, “What were you trying to learn?”

“Well, we often looked up things in the restricted section of the library, and it was usually about the protective spells that guarded Hogwarts or other highly enchanted places. The books there didn't have much more than hints about it, though. Mars was almost fanatical about those wards. I don't think I remember him studying classwork more than a total of fifteen minutes his last three years,” mused Charlie.

“Don't those books in the restricted section scream when you open them without a signed note from a teacher?” asked Harry, who knew only too well what the shrieking sounded like.

“Don't know about you, Harry, but we usually used a silencing charm on something we wanted kept quiet.” Charlie winked at him.

Harry scowled.

“Fifteen minutes of studying? How bad were his marks?” asked Ron.

“Almost as good as Bill's, if I remember correctly. We stole quite a few ingredients for potions too, especially after that git Snape started teaching,” said Charlie.

Harry and Ron exchanged guilty looks.

“We would also sneak out to test jinxes on the trolls that used to live in the Forbidden Forest. McGonagall caught us so many—er, I mean, almost caught us so many times, it was hilarious. Mars always got us off, until...” Charlie paused.

“Until what?” ed Charlie's audience.

“Until Mars and Bill became fixated on finding the Ancient Library. A small library filled with books so powerful most are banned from Britain. They say that Hogwarts kept all of their most powerful spell books in it,” said Charlie in a spooky voice.

“That's just a myth. Something to scare first years with, Charlie,” said Ginny.

“I've never heard of it, have you, Harry?” asked Ron. Harry shook his head.

“Hermione told me it was listed in the Myths and Legends part of 'Hogwarts: a History,’” said Ginny authoritatively.

Ron and Harry rolled their eyes at the mention of the most boring book ever written.

“Myth, is it, Ginny? The same chapter of the book you put so much trust in says that the Chamber of Secrets was a myth too!” retorted Charlie.

Ron, Ginny and Harry shivered. All three had been in the Chamber of Secrets and had only bad memories of it.

“Did you ever find the library?” asked Harry.

“Oh, yes. It took four tries to find it, and the place where we had to search was not a good place for students to be wandering around after curfew. I was very nervous every

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time we sneaked in there.”

“Where?” they all asked loudly.

“Dumbledore's office.”

They all gasped. “You broke into his office?” asked Ginny, astonished.

“That part was easy. He always used the name of some sweet as the password. The hard part was finding the library once we got in there. Bill and Mars decided that Dumbledore had it transfigured to make it very difficult to locate. I mean it could be anything. A peppermint imp, a quill, some parchment, anything! Dumbledore has loads of odd stuff lying around his office,” said Charlie, his eyes glowing with reminiscence.

“What did it turn out to be?” asked Ron, on the edge of his chair.

“A portrait. Bill spotted one that wasn't of an old Headmaster at Hogwarts, but instead a particularly nasty former school governor. He thought Dumbledore would never have a portrait like that in his office unless it was a joke. It had to be it. So the three of us cast the charm to reverse the transfiguration and a door appeared where the portrait was.”

“Ooooh,” muttered Ginny.

“Mars opened the door the carefully...” said Charlie tantalizingly slow.

“AND?”

“The berk set off an alarm! Mars, who had always been so annoying about checking for jinxes on anything we touched, didn't even think about an alarm,” Charlie laughed. “He was so excited that we had finally found it that his guard was down. I still tease him about that!”

“You got caught?” said Ginny peering through her fingers which had covered her eyes.

“Yep. Dumbledore showed right up and said 'Good evening' and we all jumped out of our skins. My heart skipped several beats. Then he said 'The head boy, a prefect and our most gifted student all breaking into my office at the same time? Your head of house

Professor McGonagall will never believe me.' He was grinning ear to ear, but we weren't. That might be the only time I ever saw Mars look scared. Not that Bill and I weren't terrified, mind you. Then he goes, 'Well, since Minerva will never believe this, I might as well let you off without punishment, but I will be informing—' ”

“—Your parents!” finished Mrs. Weasley. She was standing in the doorway with her hands on her hips. “You're lucky you weren't expelled!”

All four of them jumped out of their chairs.

“Oh Mum, Dumbledore was more entertained by scaring the wits out of us than he was mad. He always said curiosity wasn't a crime,” retorted Charlie after a moment's recovery from the surprise.

Mrs Weasley then went on a good long tirade about responsibility that must have lasted twenty minutes. Finally she let the four of them leave. Charlie had a mission to accomplish for the Order, so he left the Burrow. Ron, Ginny and Harry went out to the small paddock that the Weasley family owned to practice quidditch.

It was the first time that Harry had played quidditch in ages and he thoroughly enjoyed himself. It was also the first time that Harry had played with Ginny. She flew very well and passed the muggle volleyball they were using in place of a quaffle with precision. Harry and Ginny tried getting the faux quaffle past Ron to help him train for keeper, and the Weasleys threw golf balls for Harry to practice as seeker. The three of them spent the next four days practicing quidditch and doing a few household chores for Mrs Weasley. Harry had not been this carefree and happy in the last two years.

Ron was still fixated on quidditch strategy. At first Harry groaned when Ron wanted to show him his plans, but he relented and was quite surprised. Ron now had diagrams to illustrate the quidditch plays he had sent to Harry earlier in the Summer. They were much more interesting this way. Ron's ideas were concise and logical and that made them a lot easier to follow than Woods' talk of grand strategy. One evening Harry

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and Ginny were in Ron's room after dinner and he was explaining to them one of his set plays for scoring a goal.

“Two of our chasers are here and here,” he pointed to the diagram. “And one of the beaters is up here. The beater needs to hit a bludger through this area, forcing a rival chaser to move this way,” he pointed again, “thus clearing a passing lane to the third chaser over here, and then that chaser should only have to beat the keeper to score. I call it the right swing attack,” Ron finished by pointing at the label at the top of the diagram and smiled proudly.

“What about the opponent's beaters, Ron?” asked Harry.

“Remember, at the beginning of the play, they were accounted for. You can only use this play in certain situations. That's why the team has to know so many different plays,” answered Ron.

“How many plays have you drawn up?” asked Harry.

“Well, I have fifteen different plays for scoring on their side of the pitch, two long distance scoring ones, five for stealing the quaffle at mid-pitch and four different setups for defense. So far,” Ron answered, turning pink.

“That's brilliant, Ron!” said Ginny.

“Just fantastic, mate! If we get a decent third chaser, the cup is as good as ours,” added Harry.

“It's not much different than chess, really,” Ron replied, as humbly as he could manage.

They all heard someone running up the stairs to Ron's room. The door burst open and Charlie came in with an envelope in his hand.

“What's up, Charlie?” asked Ginny.

“You know about the quidditch match on Saturday?” asked Charlie, panting slightly.

“Don't remind me,” Ron grumped. He looked at Harry. “The Cannons are playing the Wimbourne Wasps for the Premiership crown. Dad tried to get tickets, but they were all snapped up.”

Ginny also looked disappointed.

“Well, lose all the long faces, you lot. A golden eagle just brought this parcel for the three of you,” said Charlie, grinning. He held out the envelope in one hand and some parchment in the other.

“All three of us? Who sent it?” asked Ron.

“Who do you think would use a golden eagle instead of an owl to send posts?” asked Charlie sarcastically.

“Mars!” said all three loudly.

Ron snatched the letter from Charlie and read it aloud.

Dear Ginny, Harry and Ron,

I had planned to be back in Britain by now, but my mission has taken a new twist and I will be gone for another week at least. I bailed a ministry official out of trouble a few weeks ago and in gratitude he gave me seven tickets to the Premiership match. Since I cannot make it back for the match I sent the tickets in this parcel.

I knew that Ron and Ginny followed the Cannons so I had planned on going with you three, Charlie, Bill and Fleur. Please take these tickets and invite someone in my place.

Sincerely,
Mars

PS Make sure Molly knows that there will be tons of security there.

“Yes!” yelled Ron, and he pumped his fist in the air while Harry and Ginny made excited noises. Charlie wore a wild smile.

“Bill's working on Mum now, and Dad's taking our side, so I think she will let you three go. Let's go see if Bill needs any support,” said Charlie as he headed out the door.

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The three of them followed Charlie down the stairs and into the kitchen where they could hear Mrs. Weasley arguing with Bill in the living room .

“This is just like Mars! He's not even in the country and he's putting people at risk. He knows full well that Harry should not be out in public!” wailed Mrs. Weasley.

“Mother, these are prime seats. We'll be in the same box as the Minister of Magic. There will be aurors in our box and the whole place will be crawling with security,” Bill said firmly.

“Molly dear, Bill is right. Very few places will be as safe as that top box,” added Mr. Weasley.

“Mars left me the keys to his truck, so we should be able to get there quickly and safely,” said Bill.

“Fine! Take Mars' side,” said Molly, in a voice full of tears. “Trust his judgment more than your own mother's. Just like when you were in school. I knew this would happen if he ever came back.”

“I wish you would quit blaming everything on him.” Bill sounded annoyed. “C'mon Dad, let's go get the truck.”

Harry heard Bill and Mr. Weasley leave through the front door. Mrs Weasley had already given in so there was no longer a reason to go into the living room. Charlie whispered goodbye and hurried out the back door, probably to go get Mars' truck with Mr. Weasley and Bill. Harry, Ron and Ginny were about to go back upstairs when they heard a new voice from the living room.

“Madame Weasley, what did Mars do to make you 'ate eem so?” asked Fleur's voice kindly.

“Oh, Fleur, dear. I don't hate him at all,” said Mrs Weasley, clearly crying. “He's just too dangerous to have around such impressionable young people. Mars thinks nothing can hurt him and that he can handle anything. Well, he may be as all-powerful

and invulnerable as he thinks he is, but the people around him aren't. Charlie and Bill have never been able to say no to any of his crazy ideas and I ... I am terrified that he will get them killed.”

“Killed?” gasped Fleur.

“In my dreams,” Mrs. Weasley sobbed, “I see them dead all of the time. M-my boys dead. I can't get the images out of my mind.”

“Oh zat is so 'orrible. What 'appens to zem?”

Still sobbing, Mrs. Weasley answered, “All the boys are just lying there, motionless and lifeless. Arthur and Harry too. I then see Ginny and I living in this house, so alone and empty. Oh, I am so scared for them!”

Harry could hear Fleur saying comforting words. Harry remembered Mrs. Weasley seeing her sons, and himself, dead when she had confronted a boggart last summer. Her greatest fear was apparently still the same. He felt guilty for eavesdropping and decided it was time to leave. He turned and saw that Ginny's eyes were full of tears; Ron looked as sad as when his father was at death's door in St. Mungo's Hospital last year. Harry put his hands on their shoulders, whispered “Let's go,” and gently pushed them towards the stairs. Harry again felt the guilt of putting the people he cared for in danger.

The mood the next morning at breakfast was much happier. Ron and Harry made it downstairs early so Bill and Mr. Weasley were still eating. Everyone seemed excited about the next day's match. Mrs. Weasley's fearful mood seemed to have passed, but Harry suspected that she was just putting on a brave face.

“Have you decided on who to invite to the match?” asked Mr Weasley.

Ron and Harry shook their heads, but Ginny said quickly “Luna.”

“Solaris Lovegood's daughter? Why, that's a great idea, Ginny. We haven't done many neighborly things lately,” added Mr. Weasley.

Ron groaned. “Not Loony Lovegood!”

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“Don't call her that! She's not loony, just a bit different,” said Harry defensively.

“But she has been coming over here all the time this holiday,” Ron objected.

“She's only been by twice, Ron, and I don't see what you're complaining about. She's been very nice to you,” snapped Ginny.

“That's what scares me,” Ron whispered to Harry. Harry ignored him.

Ginny wrote an invitation to Luna right after breakfast and sent it with Pigwidgeon.

After being the subject of constant ridicule in the Daily Prophet last year, Harry still made sure to read the paper closely each day. He was always on the lookout for more reports of mysterious deaths or another hint of a split in Voldemort's ranks. Neither appeared in today's paper, but there was an article on the quidditch match tomorrow. This would have not struck Harry as special, since it was for the Premiership, but this article was the lead news story, not the lead sports story.

Lennon to Speak at Premiership, Celebrating Dumbledore's 160th

Senior Wizengamot member Jo Anne Lennon will be the pre-match speaker at the Premiership Saturday. She will be leading the celebrations of the venerable Albus Dumbledore's 160th birthday. Her speech will highlight what Dumbledore has meant to so many of us. After the match there will be a special fireworks show featuring all of the Hogwarts Headmaster's favorites. The concessions will also feature Dumbledore's favorite sweets, and a new special 160th Birthday Edition Dumbledore Chocolate Frogs Card will be unveiled.

The rest of the article was mostly about the logistics of hiding the match from muggles, so Harry stopped reading it. Jo Anne Lennon, from what Harry had read and heard about her anyways, didn't seem the type of woman that Dumbledore would like leading a celebration of his birthday. Surely someone would have pointed that out, wouldn't they? The article had mentioned that Dumbledore would not be able to attend, so Harry figured that Dumbledore had let his displeasure be known.

There was a knock at the door, so Harry quit reading the Daily Prophet and looked

around the room. He thought he might be the only person on the ground floor so he walked over to the door to answer it. Just before he reached it, Charlie bounded into the room.

“Better let me see who it is, just to be safe, Harry,” said Charlie. Harry nodded.

Charlie looked up at a mirror that hung on a wall to the left of the door and waved his wand a bit. Slowly a picture appeared of a tall thin man with a friendly face and blond hair scattered with bits of gray. Standing next to him was a girl with long matching blond hair and a look of surprise on her face. Harry recognized the girl immediately.

“That's Luna Lovegood,” he said.

“And her father Solaris. I haven't seen him in years,” added Charlie. He opened the door, greeted the Lovegoods and invited them in.

“Hello,” said Harry and Luna to each other.

“Daddy, this is Harry Potter. Remember the great interview he gave the Quibbler last year?” said Luna airily.

“It was our best-ever seller! How could I forget the lone voice of reason? Please let me shake your hand, Mr. Potter,” said Mr. Lovegood.

Harry reached out and shook his hand.

“Yes, yes. That article really cut Fudge down to size. But this Lennon woman seems to have taken up his slack in the power-grabbing department. She will get hers though. She will,” sighed Mr. Lovegood.

The rest of the household must have heard the knock and they too entered the living room. Mrs. Weasley greeted Solaris warmly and shook his hand, Ron said a quick hi to both Lovegoods, and Ginny went up to Luna and gave her a hug. Mrs. Weasley offered the guests some tea and everyone went into the Weasley's small kitchen.

“Molly, I think it is just lovely that your daughter invited Luna to go along with her and her brothers to the Premiership! There is a bit of a complication we need to work out,

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though,” said Solaris.

“What's that?” ask Mrs. Weasley.

“Well, I'm leaving on a four-day business trip to Madrid tonight and I was going to drop off Luna with my sister in London. She really wants to see the match though...”

“Then she can stay with us for four days. We'd love to have her, wouldn't we?” asked Molly brightly.

“Of course.” said Harry and Ginny quickly. Charlie nodded and smiled, but Ron just barely moved his head.

“Wonderful! Luna tells me that your youngest son made prefect and that he led his shorthanded quidditch team to win the Hogwarts House cup last year,” said Solaris.

Harry looked at Ron, who was going pink, and he noticed that Luna was staring at Ron.

“Why, yes, he did!” said Mrs. Weasley, glowing with pride. “We are so proud of him.”

Ron saw Luna staring at him smiling and he went scarlet. Ginny suppressed a giggle and Harry did his best to hide his amusement.

“By the way, Molly, when did you get those fabulous wolves in your front yard? I don't remember seeing them a few weeks ago,” asked Solaris.

“Er,” muttered Mrs. Weasley, at a loss for words.

“A wizard named Mars conjured them to help look after Harry,” volunteered Ginny. “He is also the one who got us seats in the Minister's box.”

“Mars?” Luna and her father exclaimed loudly.

“Yes, do you know him?” asked Harry quickly.

“Well we know OF him. Don't we, Luna?” asked Solaris.

“Of course we do. We know all about him. Most people think he is an American, but his mum was English. His dad is from Florida. He is the greatest wizard since Merlin,

and also a powerful seer. It's also rumored that he can see the future of everyone in the world,” said Luna breathlessly.

Harry thought Luna sounded a bit like Hermione answering a question in class.

“He also created his own branch of magic, he knows what everyone near him is thinking, and he killed a dragon when he was just seven!” said Solaris in awe.

“He can speak to people in their dreams, and he went back in time and taught Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin how to cast the spells that protect Hogwarts,” finished Luna. “Oh, how I hope I get to meet him!”

The rest of the people at the table, even Mars' close friend Charlie, looked skeptical or even downright irritated at these pronouncements. Luna was always full of such ridiculous ideas and now it seems that she got that trait from her father. Harry had been quite impressed with Mars, but the Lovegood's claims about him beggared belief.

Luckily Charlie changed the subject to tomorrow's quidditch match and everyone followed his lead. Luna continued staring at people around the table for the rest of the conversation, but Harry was quite sure that Ron and he were getting more than their shares of her gaze. After twenty minutes or so Solaris said goodbye and told Mrs. Weasley that he would drop Luna's baggage off that evening as he left for Madrid.

Chapter Four – Jo Anne Lennon



Ron and Harry were awakened in a very undignified way on the morning of the Premiership. Harry felt himself floating in the air and the feeling of freedom that it brought was wonderful. Suddenly he was forced painfully out of his dreamworld as gravity yanked him downward. He screeched as he hurtled toward the floor.

WHAM

He slammed to the floor and bounced painfully. He grunted loudly and heard Ron swearing in pain. They both looked up and saw Ron's elder twin brothers, Fred and

George, standing in the bedroom door with their wands out laughing heartily at Harry and Ron.

“Wake up, sleepy-heads!” cried George, grinning ear to ear.

“Time is galleons, little bro! Quit wasting it and get up!” quipped Fred.

Ron sprang to his feet and yelled, “All you had to do was speak up, or at worst give us a poke!”

Harry sat up and greeted the twins. “Hullo Fred, George.” He rubbed the spot on his back where he had landed.

Ron looked annoyed as he helped Harry to his feet. He glared at his brothers and snapped, “What are you two doing here so early anyway?”

“We heard you also got tickets to the Premiership, so we decided to have breakfast with the family before apparating to the match,” answered Fred.

“You two got tickets?” asked Ron in surprise.

“Yep. We're providing the fireworks for Dumbledore's birthday celebration. Two tickets were included with the deal, but I must say they're not nearly as good as yours,” answered George.

They heard Mrs. Weasley calling from below.

“Well, hurry it up then. We don't want to be late,” said Fred, and the twins disappeared with a *crack*.

Harry and Ron quickly dressed and started down the stairs, yawning. In the kitchen the entire Weasley family, sans Percy, plus Fleur and Luna, was already crammed around the table.

“You two dears will have to eat off the counters, I'm afraid,” said Mrs. Weasley as she placed two plates of bacon, eggs and toast on the counter nearest the table. “Just not enough room at the table.”

The talk in the kitchen was cheerful and almost exclusively about the Premiership.

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Ron, Charlie and Ginny all sported Cannon badges, and Ron was wearing the Cannons hat that Harry had given him for Christmas two years ago. Luna said she had made a special hat that she would wear for the match.

Harry had only been to one quidditch match outside of Hogwarts before. It was the world cup two summers ago, and over 100,000 wizards and witches had attended. Ron told him less than 15,000 spectators would be expected today, but that was still many more than Harry was used to seeing. It was very exciting to Harry, even though he didn't have a favorite team. He looked around the kitchen as the Weasleys and guests ate and conversed happily. Harry then thought about how much today contrasted with his days last summer. He smiled broadly. His birthday was coming up, soon he would be back at Hogwarts, he was no longer considered a nutter, and there was no Umbridge at the school. His grin grew even wider.

Soon breakfast was finished and everyone helped clean up. Bill made it clear that he planned on leaving in fifteen minutes and anyone who wasn't ready would get left behind.

Ginny squealed in indignation. "Bill! You should have warned me earlier."

"Well, if you hurry, you'll be fine," answered Bill grinning.

"But that's not enough—" started Ginny.

"The more time you waste arguing about it, the less time you'll have, Ginny," interrupted Bill. His tone indicated that he was really enjoying himself.

Ginny was looking very put out and uncertain, but Fleur walked over to her, put her hand on Ginny's shoulder and said, "Ginny, do not worry, 'e will not leave wizzout us." She was smiling mischievously. Ginny and Fleur went upstairs together and neither seemed in any kind of a hurry.

Luna walked over to Ron and Harry. She said, looking at Ron, "I don't know why they can't be ready in fifteen minutes. It'll only take me three or four." She smiled at them

and wandered upstairs.

“What's the big deal? Fifteen minutes is plenty of time.” Ron sounded confused.

Charlie laughed and looked at Bill. “Ten galleons says you wait for Fleur and Ginny, Mr. Tough Talker.” He shoved his older brother.

“Shut it,” answered Bill in defeat.

Although Luna had gone upstairs after the other girls, she returned first, just a few minutes later. On her head was a magnificent hat with what looked like a real miniature cannon. She looked quite pleased with herself as she walked up to Harry and Ron in the living room.

“I will be supporting the Cannons today, so I made this hat. It sounds very realistic,” she said, tapping it with her wand.

BOOM! It sounded, and blue-gray smoke poured out of the barrel.

Charlie, Bill, Fred, George, and Harry were all very impressed and whistled or clapped. Ron, however, looked aghast.

Luna ignored his displeasure and curtsied for those who were still clapping.

Forty-five minutes later, Ginny and Fleur strolled out the front door looking like royalty. Harry thought the both of them looked fantastic and had no complaints about the time that he and the others had spent waiting. Ron, however, obviously did not share Harry's opinion.

“It's about time!” sputtered Ron. “If I were driving we'd have left you both!”

As Fleur passed Ron, she patted his head and said patronizingly, “You'll feel vairy different about zat quite soon.”

Fred and George said goodbye and disappeared with a loud *Crack*.

Everyone loaded into the Hummer, which easily accommodated all seven of them. Bill, Fleur and Charlie sat up front, and Ginny, Harry, Luna and Ron sat in the back. Bill started it up and headed down the road.

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“There are butterbeer dispensers in the front and back, plus some other drink and food dispensers that Mars put in. I wouldn't trust them, though; Mars has odd tastes,” said Bill.

Harry looked at the buttons that were built into the backs of the front seats with interest. The drink buttons were marked Coke, Bourbon, Iced Tea, and Butterbeer, and the food buttons were Pretzels, Nachos, Real Nachos, and Peanuts.

“Iced Tea? That sounds disgusting!” Ron frowned.

“It is!” answered Bill and Charlie in unison.

“Mars was always trying to get us to drink it. Ugh, that was horrible,” said Charlie.

“The bourbon was worse, though. He calls it the nectar of the gods! I love Mars like a brother, but NEVER let him cook for you. It's like eating molten lava. We nearly died, didn't we, Charlie?” said Bill.

“Yeah, that reminds me. The snacks are good, but *don't* get the real nachos. Apparently to prove you're a 'real' man in Texas you have to eat your weight in hot peppers each month,” answered Charlie.

The four teenagers in the back looked nervously at each other. They took turns pressing the butterbeer button, and four bottles popped out. Harry thought it tasted excellent and he leaned back and relaxed.

“Mum said we weren't to fly, but to drive the whole way. However, I think that'd be a waste. Do you lot agree?” asked Bill eagerly.

Everyone agreed quite vocally, so Bill engaged the invisibility booster and the car and its passengers vanished. Bill then pulled a lever backwards and the Hummer lifted off the ground. When they had raised above cloud level, Bill pulled another lever and the truck accelerated, knocking everyone back in their seats.

“Wow!” exclaimed Ginny, Ron, Luna and Fleur.

“Great, isn't it?” said Charlie. “I get to drive on the way back!”

The trip to the stadium took only about forty-five minutes of flying time and ten minutes of driving. Bill had to go through two Ministry checkpoints, and then they found a place where a few hundred other muggle-looking vehicles were and parked.

Ron was still acting offended by Luna's obnoxious hat. Each time he looked at it he made a nasty face so Harry and Ginny could see. It seemed, however, that the other Cannon fans were not as bothered as Ron. Many groups wearing Cannon colors complemented Luna on her hat and asked her to demonstrate it.

It was a short walk to the stadium, but the group still saw a few people they knew. Bill and Fleur greeted a couple from Gringotts. Harry and Ron also saw seventh-year chaser Katie Bell and her parents, but only had time to wave. Just before they had reached the gates, they saw Seamus Finnigan, his sandy-haired mother, and his best friend, Dean Thomas. Dean and Seamus ran up and they shook hands and exchanged pleasantries.

Mrs. Finnigan, however, walked straight up to Harry and held her hand out. Harry nervously put out his. He remembered vividly Seamus telling him that Mrs. Finnigan almost prevented Seamus from returning to Hogwarts because he was Harry's roommate and she, like many others who read the Daily Prophet, thought Harry was delusional and dangerous. She immediately grabbed Harry's hand with both of hers and kissed it. He was taken aback.

"Oh, Harry, me dear. Please find it in your heart to forgive me. I should've never believed that lying Daily Prophet. I turned me own lad against ya. I feel like such a scoundrel. I'm so sorry, Harry," said Mrs. Finnigan tearfully.

"Er," stuttered Harry, confused by her kissing his hand. Her apology meant so much to him that he was having trouble answering.

"Well, I don't blame ya for still being sore," she said, her head sinking. "If I were you and had gone through what you had, boy, I doubt I'd accept an apology either."

She started to walk away.

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“No! Please don't go,” Harry said desperately. “I don't hold anything against you. The lies they spread, they were very convincing. I - I would have believed them myself.” He grabbed her robe and gently pulled her towards him.

“Oh, what a lovely lad ya are. Me guilt has been a 'orrible burden. You mean so much to us all. What a brave lad then,” said Mrs. Finnigan as she squeezed both of Harry's hands with her own. She then left with Seamus and Dean.

Harry was very moved by Mrs Finnigan's reaction. For the first time in his life he understood what an important symbol he had been for people who were terrified of Voldemort. His celebrity had always been a burden to him, a millstone around his neck, but Dobby had told him what an inspiration he was to House Elves. Harry had never taken the elf seriously, but after Mrs. Finnigan's actions he thought he understood what Dobby had meant.

“She's right, you know, Harry,” said Ginny, putting her hand on Harry's shoulder. “You're really a wonderful person when you're not mad and shouting.” She smiled.

“Enough of this mushiness. Let's go watch the match,” said Ron grumpily. He pushed Harry and Ginny apart and walked briskly towards the gates.

The rest of the grinning group followed him into the stadium.

Their box, just as at the World Cup two years ago, was at the top and in the middle of the stadium. It took quite a while to walk up all the steps. Two aurors stood outside the doorway that led into the box. The one on the right side of the door was an unremarkable-looking middle-aged wizard, but the other auror had piercing steel gray eyes, very short hair and severe facial features.

“Names?” asked the auror on the right.

“We're the Weasley party; there are seven of us, and we are guests of Mr. Bagman,” answered Bill, showing the auror the tickets.

“Ludo Bagman?” asked Ginny, Harry and Ron.

Bill give them a nasty look and Charlie and Fleur nudged them subtly so they kept quiet.

“Oh yes, Ludo said to expect you. Which one of you is Mars, by the way?” asked the other auror.

“He couldn't make it. I am to give Mr Bagman his apologies,” answered Bill curtly.

The auror frowned like he had been denied a real treat, but he motioned for them to go into the Minister's box. They filed in.

There were only a few people in the box when they entered and none were the Minister of Magic or Ludo Bagman.

“Not all the seats are together. I'm still amazed that Bagman got seven seats up here at all. Fleur and I will sit up top, and you lot have front row tickets,” said Bill.

“I thought Bagman got run out of town for stealing all those people's money,” asked Ron.

“Mars bailed him out. Didn't you read his letter?” said Charlie quietly.

A look of understanding washed across the faces of Ginny, Harry and Ron.

“Money means nothing to Mars. His father is loaded, and Mars spent eleven years as a Spirit Defender. That job is so dangerous it pays almost as much as Cornelius Fudge makes. Most wizards get killed or quit before they finish more than three six-month tours,” said Bill.

The teenagers gasped. “Really?” asked Ginny.

“Yep, so getting a senior Ministry member in his debt was worth a lot of galleons to him,” finished Bill.

Bill and Fleur went up the steps hand in hand and sat in the top row of the box. The rest of them sat on the right side in the front row.

“What's a Spirit Defender?” asked Ginny.

Charlie opened his mouth to answer but Luna beat him to it.

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“They're a group of wizards and witches from around the world who help the natives in the Americas keep the Malsumis Spirits at bay.”

“Malsawhat spirits?” asked Ron.

“Malsumis Spirits!” snapped Luna more harshly than Harry had ever heard her use with Ron.

Charlie spoke up. “It's a generic name used to describe the various evil spirits that roam the American mountain ranges and deserts. They would cause tremendous casualties if there weren't a large organization dedicated to containing them. For thousands of years, the Native American wizards suffered alone in this labor. Now, of course, wizards from all over the world join their effort. Because of their sacrifice, the Spirit Defenders are revered in the Americas. Europeans ignorantly call them Demon Fighters, and sadly, because they tend to attract the wilder sort, most Europeans think of them as outlaws.”

Seeing the awe on the other's faces, he added quickly, “Well, Mars was my best mate in school. Bill and I used to quiz him about American wizards all the time.”

“The average wizard or witch only lasts eighteen months on the job?” asked Harry.

“That's what I hear. I think the eleven years Mars managed is some kind of record,” answered Charlie.

“Oh Harry, do you think he'll see you soon? I'd love to meet him,” Luna gushed.

“He said in a week or so, but he seems really busy. I sure have a lot of questions to ask him,” answered Harry. He could tell from the look on her face what her next question would be, so he answered it before she could get it out. “I'll make sure to introduce you, Luna.”

Luna beamed at him.

A few minutes later a group of ten or so people entered the box. Three were aurors—Harry and the others recognized one of them as Kingsley Shacklebolt—and the rest

appeared to be Ministry officials. Harry only recognized two of the officials: Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic, and Amelia Bones, the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; but they all seemed to know him. A few pointed in his direction and all were looking his way. Kingsley smiled warmly at their group and then got behind the Minister. Fudge and Bones headed toward Harry and the others.

“Harry, dear boy, excellent to see you here. It should be a great match. I'm still shocked that the Wasps upset the Tornadoes in the semis,” said Fudge, grinning as he shook Harry's hand vigorously.

Harry was startled. The last two times he had met the Minister it hadn't been amicable. Harry could only stammer out, “So was I.”

Mrs. Bones, a stern and powerful-looking witch with a harsh haircut, also greeted him with a smile. “My niece Susan told me how much you taught her in your club last year. I'm very impressed, young Harry.” She patted him on the shoulder. She and Fudge then walked down the row to their seats.

Ron and Ginny looked at Harry with equally confused faces. He could only shrug. He suspected Mars had something to do with their change in attitude, but he wasn't sure how Mars had managed it. The teens sat without speaking for a minute or so before a familiar voice behind them broke the silence.

“Ahoy there!”

They all turned towards the entrance and saw the large form of Ludo Bagman. He was wearing his old Wimbourne Wasps robes, which stretched tightly across his frame. His face was rosy and friendly-looking and many people in the box scrambled up to him and shook his hand. His eyes met Harry's and then Bill's. Bagman then waded through the crowd until he reached Fleur and Bill in the top row. He shook Bill's hand and kissed Fleur's and chatted with them both. He then made his way down to the front row and greeted Harry enthusiastically.

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“Harry! How really corking to see you. I trust you've been well?”

Harry nodded. Bagman's friendly greeting made him as nervous as the one Fudge and Bones had given.

“We have a mutual friend in that amazing American Mars,” said Bagman. Then he whispered so that only Harry, and Ron and Ginny on each side of him, could hear. “Mars really helped me out with the Goblins and a few Wizards as far as debts went. He only required me to break my gambling habit. I didn't think I had a problem, but he convinced me. Yes, he's a damn fine man, that one.”

Ludo Bagman shook hands with all five of them and then headed toward an empty area in the front row. He waved at Cornelius Fudge and held his wand to his throat.

“Sonorus!” said Bagman and then his voice was magically magnified so it could be heard throughout the stadium.

“Ladies and Gentlemen. Welcome to the Premiership match between the Chudley Cannons and the Wimbourne Wasps!”

The crowd cheered wildly at this pronouncement.

“Before we start the match, please give a warm welcome to Jo Anne Lennon. She will now pay homage to the greatest living wizard, Albus Dumbledore, on his one hundred and sixtieth birthday!” said Bagman excitedly.

Harry looked on the field and saw Jo Anne Lennon walking to mid-pitch. She was even more attractive in person than her picture had been in the Daily Prophet. Her shoulder-length blond hair had a few perfectly placed spots of gray. She looked like an immaculate, middle-aged muggle woman. She was trim, her face was unwrinkled, she walked almost as gracefully as Fleur, and her toothy smile sported very white teeth. She acknowledged the crowd's cheers with a wave and started her speech.

“Witches, Wizards, Goblins, Hags and Squibs, tonight as we celebrate the 160th birthday of one of the greatest wizards in British History, I would like to be able to talk

about what a glorious day today is in the history of the world. As we celebrate the birth of this man who with his whole heart and soul hates war, I would like to be able to speak of peace in our time – of war being outlawed – and of the absence of violence. These would be truly appropriate things to be able to mention as we celebrate the birthday of Albus Dumbledore.

“Fifteen years after a war has been won, our hearts should anticipate a long peace – and our minds should be free from the heavy weight that comes with war. But this is not such a period – for this is not a period of peace. This is a time of war, but only a phony war is being fought by the Ministry. This Ministry was only moved to admit that any kind of war existed at all after being dragged into it kicking and screaming by Albus Dumbledore and our beloved Harry Potter. Those two heroes last year were continually maligned by the Ministry-controlled press in order to discredit them.

“Despite inarguable proof, there were constant denials that spies and servants of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named existed among the Minister of Magic's closest advisers and friends. Death Eaters were his biggest contributors and influenced his decisions and hirings. Now we are told the ministry has righted itself, corrected its mistakes and learned its lessons. But has it?

“How have the forces of evil avoided so much as *one* of their number being captured or killed by the Ministry since Dumbledore himself brought in several a month ago? Not only has the Ministry been impotent in defeating the Death Eaters in new battles, they managed to let the fruits of our one victory rot as the above-mentioned Death Eaters escaped from Azkaban with help from within.

“This indicates the swiftness of the tempo of the Death Eater victories in the phony war. As the great Ptolmey said, 'When a great nation of wizards is destroyed, it will not be from enemies from without, but rather because of enemies from within.' The reason we find ourselves in a position of impotency is not because our enemy has such powerful

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wizards. We have Albus Dumbledore, Alastor Moody and the recently returned great young American wizard Mars on our side. The reason for our weakness is the traitorous actions of those who have been treated so well by our Nation. It has not been the less fortunate poorer wizarding families or the muggleborns who have been traitorous, but rather those who have reaped the benefits our powerful Ministry has doled out. Those from the finest homes, the finest families and finest jobs that the Ministry can give.

“I have here in my hand a list of 57 ... a list of names that were made known to the Minister of Magic as being known sympathizers of You-Know-Who and who are nevertheless still working and shaping policy in the Ministry.

“As you know, until very recently the Minister of Magic proclaimed his loyalty to a man long suspected of being in You-Know-Who's inner circle. Lucius Malfoy was given access to every Ministry secret and held great sway over the Minister himself. Dumbledore exposed Malfoy as the murderous traitor he was and has lighted the spark which is resulting in a moral uprising and will end only when the whole sorry mess of twisted, warped wizards and witches are swept away from the national scene so that we may have a new birth of honesty and decency in the Ministry. We of this uprising demand that Minister Fudge appoint a committee to root out the spies in the Ministry or resign and let the next Minister do it for him!”

As she said the last bit, much of the crowd cheered. She smiled charismatically and added, “Thank you so much for your huge support and warm welcome. Happy Birthday Albus Dumbledore, and good luck Wasps and Cannons!”

When she finished her speech, Lennon held up her hands and spun around, egging on the crowd to cheer. And cheer they did. It seemed that all fifteen thousand were clapping, yelling and whistling. Before she left the middle of the pitch, she glared up at the Minister's box in contempt. As she walked into the stands the crowd was chanting loudly, “Lennon! Lennon! Lennon!”

Harry looked over at Cornelius Fudge and saw that the Minister had his face buried in his hands and was shaking his head. The officials sitting near him looked white with fear and were glancing nervously around the box as if they expected to be trampled by an angry mob. The speech certainly seemed more aimed at stirring up rebellion against the Ministry than celebrating Dumbledore's birthday.

No violence came against the officials however, and the two quidditch teams walked onto the field, pushing the crowd noise up a level. Ron, Charlie and Ginny were cheering wildly in their box and Luna's cannon fired loudly over the cheers. The excitement was contagious and soon Harry was enjoying himself as much as his friends. The referee mounted his broom, pointed his wand at the ball crate, and released the bludgers, the golden snitch and the quaffle.

Harry and Ron followed the players with the two pairs of omnioculars that Harry had purchased at the Quidditch World Cup two summers ago. The action was furious. Harry was impressed with the speed and teamwork of the chasers. They reminded him of the Irish chasers he had seen at the World Cup. The teams were locked in a defensive struggle, with the quaffle rarely moving away from mid-pitch. The chasers and beaters continually stopped the advancement of each team. The lone shot on goal was easily blocked by the Wimbourne keeper. After about ten minutes Harry handed Ginny his omnioculars for awhile, for which she thanked him heartily.

Harry looked around the box. The Ministry officials seemed to have forgotten Lennon's threatening speech and were really getting into the match. Ludo Bagman was animatedly calling the play by play, as usual, but Bill and Fleur were paying the players no attention at all. They each had a set of omnioculars to their eyes, but instead of the match, they were watching the crowd on the other side of the stadium. Harry noted the place where he thought Bill and Fleur were staring and turned his attention back to quidditch.

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After an hour both teams had scored three goals, and the atmosphere was thick with tension. Each time the Cannons scored, Luna's hat fired, and this seemed to really stir up Ron's spirit. Luna had managed to move so that she was sitting by him and on the third Cannon score, he even allowed Luna to hug him in celebration. Because of the excitement Harry didn't think Ron even noticed who was hugging him, but Luna, on the other hand, knew exactly what was going on.

Ginny gave Harry the omnioculars back and he immediately aimed them at the spot in the crowd that Bill and Fleur continued to watch. At first Harry didn't see anything of interest, just people watching the match, but then he spotted Jo Anne Lennon, who was ignoring the match and chatting with an evil-looking red-headed and bearded wizard beside her. He had a muscular build and several gold teeth. The wizard was reaching his hand into his robe. Harry focused the omnioculars on where his hand would come out, but just then Ginny grabbed him.

“Harry, they're diving for the snitch!” she squealed. Ginny pushed his omnioculars away from Lennon and the wizard toward the Cannon's goal. “Look!” she screamed, as Harry fought to return his sights to Lennon, but the Cannon Seeker must have caught the snitch because pandemonium broke out all around.

Ron jumped up and down, screaming, “We won! We won!” Charlie lifted Ginny into the air and they both screamed at the top of their lungs, while Luna fired off her Cannon hat. Their box was full of celebrating or cursing people, except for Harry, Fleur and Bill. Harry had given up hope of finding out what the wizard had passed Lennon, but he wanted to ask Bill and Fleur what they had seen. He was trying to navigate his way up to the top of the box where Fleur and Bill were seated, but Ron, Ginny and Luna all caught him in a hug while they sang the Cannon team song. Harry gave up for now and joined in celebrating with the Weasleys.

“That match was over quickly. It'll be at least two hours before it's dark enough for

Fred and George's fireworks,” said Ginny nervously. “I hope enough people hang around to see them.”

Ron and Harry nodded in agreement. Harry wanted the twin's first big job to go over well.

Bill and Fleur had made their way down from the top of the box to where Harry and the others were standing.

“Charlie. Fleur and I are going to apparate back. We have some information we need to pass on,” said Bill quietly.

“No worries. We'll stay for the fireworks and I'll drive everyone back,” said Charlie.

“Bill, is it about Lennon and that red-headed wizard?” whispered Harry.

Bill and Fleur looked surprised. Bill answered, “Yes, Harry, but I don't want to discuss it here.”

“What did he pull out of his cloak?” asked Harry quietly.

“Fermez-la! 'arry.” said Fleur, placing a finger over his lips. She and Bill then left the box.

“What were you asking them about?” quizzed Ginny.

“Yeah,” added Ron.

“Bill said not to discuss it here,” answered Harry.

“Oy, Charlie Weasley!” yelled one of the aurors who had been guarding the entrance.

Charlie looked confused, but answered the auror.

“There's a bloke out here claiming to be your brother George. He wants a word with you,” said the auror. Charlie quickly left his seat and went outside.

“Hope there's nothing wrong with the fireworks,” said Ron nervously.

Charlie returned shortly, looking excited.

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“Apparently not enough people were assigned to the after-game grounds crew. Fred and George need some help setting up and shooting off the fireworks. You lot interested?” he asked with a smile.

After a resounding yes, the five of them made their way to the grounds and met up with the twins. It seemed that a zero must have been dropped from the requirements form that the twins had given the Premiership. Instead of a crew of ten to help them set up, they were given a crew of one.

“And the git sprained his ankle celebrating during the match!” complained Fred.

Luna, Harry, and the Weasleys worked very hard for the next two hours getting the fireworks where the twins wanted them. It was hard but fun work and Harry was really looking forward to seeing the display. The magical fireworks they had designed and set off at Hogwarts had been impressive, but George said that they were mere trifles compared to what Harry was going to see tonight.

“Our first gig had to be a biggie, plus it's for Dumbledore. We can't let the old man down,” added Fred.

Finally they had all the equipment in place and the sky was darkening rapidly. The crowd had left the stadium in droves and for a while everyone was nervous that the seven of them would be the only spectators. However, in the last hour, thousands of people had returned in an even more festive mood.

The twins started the show with a multicolored explosive that formed the rough shape of Dumbledore firing sparks out of his wand. The crowd said “Ooo” and “Ah” in unison and clapped enthusiastically. The next set were sparking balls of color that chased each other all around the stadium. Whenever two of them touched, a great burst of color appeared, accompanied by a loud bang. This really got the crowd going. The next twenty minutes or so were a wide variety of excellent pyrotechnics, too many for Harry to remember them all. George then called everyone over to help with the finale. A huge ring

of fireworks had to be set off all at the same time, and their team rose to the challenge. The explosives floated into the air and ignited into an enormous and perfectly shaped and colored phoenix. It flew slowly over the stadium and the crowd gaped in awe, as did Harry and Ron. Then, when it was directly in the middle of the field, the fiery bird burst into a huge fireball of blinding light. Out of the explosion fell a tiny ball of flame that slowly changed into a smaller phoenix that regained altitude and flew out of the stadium and into the night.

Harry clapped so hard and screamed so loudly it hurt. He was very impressed by the twins' show. Harry was not the only one impressed; Luna, the rest of the Weasleys and the crowd were thundering their approval. A circle of light appeared on the twins, and Ludo Bagman's voice rang out.

“Thanks so much for a fantastic show, Fred and George Weasley! Ladies and Gentlemen, please make some noise for our supreme masters of pyrotechnics!”

Screams and applause poured down from the stands. Many had their wands out, shooting up yellow sparks in approval. Fred and George bowed grandly to the crowd. Harry and the others from the Burrow congratulated the twins and after a few minutes headed out of the stadium.

Overall their group was a happy one when they finally reached the Hummer. Harry, however, was still annoyed that he had not been able to find out if Bill or Fleur had seen what the redheaded wizard had handed Lennon during the match. He also wanted to know why they were so keen on watching her. They piled into the truck, Charlie started it up, and they headed for home. The talk on the way home was mostly about the match and the fireworks, but Harry's mind was always straying to Jo Anne Lennon.

Chapter Five – OWL Results



During the two days following the Premiership, all conversations at the Burrow were dominated by either the match or the twins' incredible fireworks. Even the Daily Prophet mentioned the wonderful fireworks. The writeup was short, as many pages were devoted to covering the match and Lennon's speech, but just the being in the newspaper was exciting enough for most of the Burrow. Mrs. Weasley still wasn't too happy about her sons running a joke shop, but even she had to admit they were doing it well.

Harry's mind, however, was drifting away from the Premiership and turning towards the near future. His birthday was nearing, which meant July was about to end, and he had been told that in July he, along with other students in his year, would be receiving his OWL results. While he was anxious to know how he did on the exams, part of him wished the results would be delayed indefinitely. He had already been doing

poorly on his History of Magic exam when he had suffered the horrible vision of Sirius being tortured by Voldemort and had to leave it early. Then Hagrid had been attacked during his practical Astronomy exam, and Harry had gotten virtually no work done during the last twenty-five minutes. He really dreaded seeing those results. His Divination exam had been without interruption, but Harry had made a real pig's ear of it. He didn't see any visions in the crystal ball, and when he tried to make things up they sounded stupid. However, receiving a failing mark in that lousy subject would not bother him much.

He was really dreading Hermione's reactions to his marks. She always made a fuss over exams and their results even though it made Ron and Harry ill. With the last set of tests being the most important that they had taken so far, Harry was certain that Hermione's fussing would reach an all time high. He sighed, imagining her disappointed look when she saw his fails in Astronomy, Divination and History of Magic.

His sudden worry about Hermione's reaction had been caused by a post he had received that morning. His snowy owl, Hedwig, had brought him a message from Hermione. Harry wasn't sure how Hedwig had known Hermione was planning to send him a letter, but it wasn't the first time she had done such an extraordinary thing.

Dear Harry and Ron,

Two days ago we arrived home from our wonderful trip to California. The wizards there do all sorts of interesting things and have a quite different assortment of spells. Many of them do not even use wands, but staves and other things. They call them focus objects. I got several books about them, I'm sure you'll want to read them when I have finished.

I am hoping to come visit you two and Ginny very soon. I have almost got my parents convinced to let me stay the rest of the summer, but I have had to promise to spend the Christmas holiday with them. I hope your muggle family treated you better after Mad-Eye's warning, Harry.

I am sure you both are as disappointed as I that our OWL results have not been released yet. But don't fret too much, I am sure they are almost ready.

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Love from Hermione.

P.S. I spoke to quite a few free house elves in America. They really seemed to be enjoying themselves and have adjusted well. There is talk that another clan may free their house elves, isn't that exciting! I just wish I could have brought one back with me to talk with Winky. I am sure that would cheer her up.

“Still going on about house elves?” asked Ron. “You would have thought she would be sour on them after that toerag Kreacher nearly got us all killed.”

“He did get Sirius killed!” added Ginny angrily.

Harry swallowed hard. He still blamed himself for Sirius dying, but there was no doubt that if he ever saw that evil elf Kreacher again violence would follow.

“Mum's already said Hermione can stay with us,” said Ginny. “Hopefully she can make it to your birthday party, Harry.”

Harry smiled at the mention of his party. All of his previous birthdays had been spent at the Dursleys, so there had never been a party; and this was beginning to sound like a great one. The twins were coming and had promised to bring something “Excellent!”, Bill had asked Mars to come by, Tonks and Moody were expected, and so was Professor Lupin. Mrs. Weasley was making Harry's favorite desserts, and all thoughts of Privet Drive were far from his mind. The rest of the day passed quickly as Harry enjoyed his time with the Weasleys.

The next morning, the post arrived as the kids were cleaning up after breakfast. Both Pigwidgeon and a Hogwarts school owl were on the window sill. Harry and Ron froze. The OWL results were in. Even though Harry knew they would come soon, he was not prepared to see them.

“What's the matter with you two?” asked Ginny as she took the letter from Pig and the small parcel from the school owl. When they didn't answer, she walked over to them, staring. “Snap out of it, you're scaring me.”

“Ginny,” managed Ron. “It's our OWL results. I don't think I want to see them.”

Harry nodded in silent agreement.

Ginny's look changed from confused to sympathetic. “Well, putting it off won't help. I can open them for you if you like,” she offered.

Harry nodded and so did Ron. As long as it wasn't Hermione, Harry had no problem with someone else breaking the bad news to him.

She opened the parcel and took out three envelopes marked with the names Ginevra Weasley, Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter. She opened Ron's first. Ron covered his eyes.

“You got all worked up for nothing. This is just your ticket for the Hogwarts express and a list of the requirements for the sixth year,” said Ginny.

“But that will tell us what classes we have!” said Harry.

“And what OWLs we failed. Put it away, Ginny! We'll look at it later,” wailed Ron.

Ginny sighed and looked at them like they were pathetic. She then looked at his letter more closely and said, “There's nothing in here about classes or books. It just says when to be at Kings Cross.”

Harry and Ron breathed a sigh of relief.

She then opened her own Hogwarts letter and now it seemed it was her turn to freeze.

“What?” said Harry and Ron together.

Ginny blinked and pulled out a scarlet and gold Gryffindor prefect's badge.

“Oh!” said Ron.

Harry swallowed hard. It seemed he would be surrounded by prefects in his sixth year. He quickly decided, however, not to be jealous, and spoke up. “Congratulations, Ginny! I'm not surprised.”

“Oh, thank you, Harry!” she exclaimed and ran to Harry, throwing her arms about

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him.

“Yeah, good job, Gin,” said Ron when he could speak again.

Ginny let go of Harry and hugged her brother quickly. “I must tell Mum!” She took off up the stairs.

Ron looked at Harry seriously.

“Look, mate. I hope all these prefects around you don't get you down. I know Dumbledore would have picked you over me if it hadn't been for V-Voldemort coming back,” said Ron.

Harry was startled. Ron had said Voldemort's name! He remembered the first time that Hermione had said Voldemort's name last year. It had been such a surprise then that it had brought Harry out of a rage. Ron's saying it now was an even bigger shock. Hermione hadn't even known who Voldemort was until she was eleven. Ron had been taught to fear him and his name since birth. It had to have been a real act of bravery for him.

Harry looked his best friend in the eye. “You don't know that, Ron. He has had a lot of practice naming Weasleys prefects, you know.” Harry smiled. “Besides, if I ever feel left out I just remember that my Dad and Sirius weren't prefects.”

“Mars wasn't one either,” added Ron, smiling back.

“That's right, Bill was! You're all a bunch of prats anyways,” pronounced Harry, punching Ron on the shoulder.

Shrieks of joy from upstairs told the boys that Ginny had informed her mother. A few moments later they heard feet running down the steps. Mrs. Weasley rushed into the kitchen, glowing with pride. Ginny was behind her, smiling happily.

“Did you two hear about Ginny?” she asked. They both nodded. “Oh, her father will be so proud. We'll have a double celebration tomorrow, for Harry and Ginny!” She turned and looked at Harry with sudden concern. “Oh, Harry dear, you don't mind, do you?”

“Course not,” Harry said quickly.

Mrs. Weasley rubbed his shoulder gently and went back upstairs.

Harry noticed Ginny still had the unopened envelope in her hand that Pig had brought that morning. Ron apparently noticed the letter too, for he asked his sister, “Ginny, who's that letter for?”

“Oh yes, I'd forgotten about it. It's to me, and the handwriting looks like Hermione's,” she said, opening the letter. She read it quickly. “Her parents have agreed to let her stay with us the rest of the summer, and if we can pick her up today, she can make it to your birthday party, Harry!”

“Lets see if we can find Charlie so he can drive us to get her,” said Harry, who was keen to fly in the Hummer again.

“Yeah!” answered the Weasleys.

Within the hour the three of them had found Charlie and convinced him to take them to pick up Hermione. They flew part of the way and had a great time. When Hermione first saw the exterior of the mammoth vehicle she was taken aback.

“It must take a lot of petrol to run this monstrosity,” commented Hermione.

“Don't be thick,” said Charlie. “Do you think any vehicle that Mars owned wouldn't run on magic?” Hermione looked at him blankly.

They all climbed into the truck. Ron was riding shotgun—Charlie said that was what Mars called the front passenger seat—with Charlie, while Harry was in the back with the girls. Charlie engaged the invisibility booster, and they took off into the air.

“It's brilliant, isn't it?” asked Harry joyfully. Ginny nodded, but Hermione looked concerned.

“Aren't flying cars considered a misuse of muggle artifacts? Didn't you and Ron almost get expelled over something like this?” Hermione asked nervously.

“Hermione, you really are starting to sound like Mum,” said Charlie exasperatedly.

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“Mars is a little better at this than Dad; we are not going to be caught.” He shook his head and looked at Ron.

Hermione ignored Charlie's dig, but she appeared to be concentrating. Finally she spoke again. “You said that this vehicle belongs to Mars. Is he a wizard in the Order?”

“No,” said Charlie. He noticed the surprised look on Ron's face and elaborated. “Mars did expect to join the order, but if two people object to your entrance, you're not allowed in.”

“Two people voted against Mars?” asked Ginny in surprise.

“Actually three did, Gin. Snape, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Mum,” answered Charlie.

Ginny, Ron and Harry gaped.

“But Mars said that Dumbledore invited him to come all the way from Texas just to help the Order,” said Harry.

“Texas?” asked Hermione in surprise. “The Mars that owns this truck is from Texas?”

“Yes,” answered Charlie.

“Why do you sound so surprised, Hermione?” asked Ron.

“Because while I was in California, I read something about a Texas wizard named Mars. Well, actually I heard a lot more than I read about him. It seemed every wizard or witch there knew something about him. Or at least they had heard something; their *facts* often contradicted with each other,” said Hermione.

“What were they saying, Hermione?” asked Ginny.

“The stuff of legends, mostly. Several people say he killed a dragon single handedly when he was nine. A few more claimed he reads everyone's mind that he meets. Er, and—oh yes—that he created his own branch of magic, whatever that means. The most absurd was that he went back in time and taught the Mayan priests how to ward off

evil spirits. There was some other rubbish too, about seeing the future I think, but nothing noteworthy,” she said dismissively.

“Sounds like the same nonsense that Loony Lovegood was spouting about him,” said Ron with a laugh.

“Don't call her Loony!” spat Harry and Ginny simultaneously.

“Okay, okay,” replied Ron, wincing.

“Remember when people all called me a nutter? Did you enjoy that?” asked Harry crossly.

“Course not!” answered Ron quickly.

“She's been so nice to you all summer! I can't believe you still call her that. After all she's been through with us.” Ginny shook her finger at her brother.

“So, you have been seeing her all summer, have you now, Ron?” asked Hermione dangerously.

“No!” answered Ron firmly, but he was going a bit pink. “She's been coming by to see Ginny. And to see Harry, too. I think she really wants to meet Mars.”

Hermione did not reply. She crossed her arms and stared out the window the rest of the trip.

As Charlie pulled into the Weasley's front yard, Hermione saw the granite wolf guardians that Mars had created the night Harry arrived. She stared at them as the truck came to a stop. As they exited the vehicle, Hermione asked, “Are those what I think they are? Sentinel Guardians?”

“I think that's what Mars called them. He created them the night he brought me to the Burrow. Only Fleur and I were outside when he did it,” said Harry.

“Wow. That's supposed to be one of the hardest conjuring spells in all of Transfiguration. And those objects are enormous. Most sentinel guardians are tiny, and warn you if something comes near them,” said Hermione, gaping at the huge wolves.

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“Oh, these do a lot more than make noise if a Death Eater comes near them, Hermione,” Charlie grinned.

“What? Are you kidding? The ruddy things haven't done anything since Mars conjured them,” exclaimed Ron.

“Don't be too sure of that, Ron. Come over here,” said Charlie as he walked up to the nearest wolf. “See these indentations in the lawn? Both of these guardians have been walking recently.”

Harry, Ron and Hermione all gasped.

Ginny was looking at the other wolf and she squeaked. “Oh my! Look at this.” She was pointing at the wolf's feet. On each of its front paws dried blood was clearly evident.

Hermione looked nervous when she asked, “So that means that someone tried to break into the Burrow?”

“Or they might have been a little too close while they were spying. Either way, I imagine it was the last thing they ever did,” answered Charlie.

“They're ordered to kill?” Hermione gasped.

“Of course. You don't just ask a Death Eater nicely to leave you alone. They know Harry's here, and I doubt the Donnies are going to give up on trying to kill him,” Charlie said grimly.

“What? They tried to kill you, Harry? How did they find out you were here?” asked Hermione, looking frightened.

“We can explain it when we get inside. But don't be nervous. They don't want anything to do with those wolves, trust me,” said Charlie confidently.

When they entered the Burrow, Hermione was still frosty to Ron, but perfectly friendly to everyone else. Mrs. Weasley greeted Hermione warmly, and the two girls went upstairs to get Hermione settled into Ginny's room.

Mrs. Weasley turned to Ron and Harry. “Come into the kitchen, boys,” she said in

an odd voice.

Ron and Harry followed her with some trepidation. When they entered the kitchen, Mrs. Weasley was standing next to the table, on which were three large, beautiful red velvet envelopes. Each had a name written in fancy script on the front: Ronald Weasley, Harry Potter and Hermione Granger. Their OWL results were finally in; there was no more possibility of delay. It was time to face the music.

“Errol had these with him. I think he must have passed out just before he made it to the house, because I found him asleep in the garden after you left to get Hermione,” said Mrs. Weasley.

“Let's look at them quick, before Hermione gets back down here,” suggested Harry.

“Yeah, Hermione will just nag us for not knowing enough about Goblin rebellions,” agreed Ron.

They both started for the table, but stopped and turned around at a voice from the doorway behind them.

“Why in the world would I fuss about Goblin—” said Hermione, stopping cold when she saw the envelopes. “OWL results! Not before time!” she added, rushing forward to her envelope.

Harry and Ron resigned themselves to the unenviable task of seeing their OWL results at the same time Hermione did. No use waiting, Harry thought, get the pain and lecturing over as quickly as possible. Harry could tell from Ron's face that he was on the same line of thought. They both followed Hermione to the table and slowly opened the gorgeous envelopes.

Hermione was first to open and look through her envelope. Inside were golden certificates which had red lettering of perfect quality. She slowly counted the papers and then shrieked joyfully.

“Twelve OWLs! Oh, I was so worried about Astronomy and Ancient Runes,” she

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beamed.

Mrs. Weasley put her arm around Hermione and hugged her. “Oh, that is just excellent, my dear. The same as Bill and P-Percy.” Her voice faltered as she said the name of her wayward son.

Hermione looked at her sadly and hugged Mrs. Weasley with one arm.

Harry started pulling out the certificates from his envelope and reading them to himself. Defense Against the Dark Arts written – Outstanding: Well, he was pretty sure he had achieved that when he took that test, but it still made him smile. Defense Against the Dark Arts practical – Outstanding: He had been positive after that test that he was going to get an O. So far, so good, he thought.

The next certificate read Transfiguration – Exceeds Expectations. Harry read this with relief. He remembered Professor McGonagall telling him that he needed to achieve an E to progress to the NEWT level in that subject. She had also told him that he needed a NEWT certification in Transfiguration to become an auror.

Harry was feeling much more positive about seeing his scores now and he quickly pulled out the next certificate. Care of Magical Creatures – Exceeds Expectations: Yes! He felt good about proving how much Hagrid had taught him. The next certificate was Herbology – Average: It was the lowest passing score, but Harry didn't mind; he would take that score any day!

The next certificate, and Harry was now rejoicing that he could feel even more papers underneath this one, was Charms – Exceeds Expectations: Harry knew he had done well on this test also. He eagerly pulled the next certificate out which was Potions written – Outstanding. Harry's knees wobbled. He remembered doing well, but an O in potions? He had never dreamed that could happen. He pulled out the next certificate, which read Potions practical – Outstanding. This all seemed unreal to Harry. He had just gotten the highest scores possible on his most hated subject.

He felt still more papers in the envelopes. He pulled the next certificate out slowly; it read Astronomy – Outstanding. Harry's mind reeled. He hadn't answered a question in the last twenty-five minutes of the practical part of the exam. How could he have gotten an O? Still a little shaky, Harry pulled out the last two pieces of paper from the envelope. The first one was not a OWL certificate, but a letter:

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry OWL Fails Report

Student: Harry Potter

Subject	Mark
-----	-----
Divination	D
History of Magic	T

T? For Troll? Harry gasped. Fred was right—there was a mark less than Dreadful. But who cared? He had gotten nine OWLs, and five were Outstanding! The last paper was a form to fill out and send back to the school. It was something about which classes he could take, but he was too excited to bother reading it now. He was so pleased with his marks that he shouted triumphantly.

Ron too looked very happy. “I got nine OWLs, mate!” he glowed.

“Me too,” replied Harry, clasping Ron on the shoulder. “Five Outstandings! I can't believe it!”

“I got five O's also!” Ron beamed as his mother came over to hug him, looking proudly at the OWL certificates.

“Well done!” said Hermione, who looked as proud of them as Mrs. Weasley.

Ginny and Charlie had now entered the kitchen to see what all the fuss was about. They too congratulated the three for their excellent OWL results.

“I still can't believe I got an O on both potion OWLs,” said Harry excitedly.

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“The O in Astronomy is the one that shocked me the most. I was so put out about Hagrid and McGonagall it was hard to concentrate for the last half-hour,” added Ron.

“You got an Outstanding in Astronomy, Ron?” Hermione sounded shocked.

“Yeah,” he said, showing her the golden piece of paper.

Hermione stared at the certificate in disbelief. Her face had lost some of its happiness.

“I got an O in Astronomy also, Hermione. What's the matter?” asked Harry.

The matter was that Hermione had only received an E in Astronomy. She had 10 Outstandings and two Exceeds Expectations: Astronomy and Ancient Runes. Ron had never beaten her on an exam before, and he seemed very excited about it. In fact, he repeated several times, “I can't believe I beat Hermione on an exam. This will make the Daily Prophet!”, drawing fewer laughs with each iteration. Harry himself had only beaten Hermione on an exam once before, Professor Lupin's, but while that had not seemed to bother her, this clearly did. Harry was sure that Ron's going on and on about it didn't help much. No one but Harry seemed to notice that Hermione was no longer joyful.

Mrs. Weasley was so excited about Ron's OWLs and Ginny becoming a prefect that she decided to take her children to see their father at work.

“Your father always takes a late lunch, so we may be able to dine with him. Would you like to come with us?” Mrs. Weasley asked Harry and Hermione.

“Well,” said Hermione carefully, “I need to finish unpacking.”

“I'll stay and help her,” added Harry. “You go on and celebrate as a family.”

The Weasleys smiled at them and the four went up to the fireplace to travel to the Ministry via floo powder.

Harry then turned to Hermione and said, “Hermione, I know Ron's gloating is annoying, but it won't last. He's never beaten you in a class before, it's no wonder he's excited.”

“I know, it's just hard to accept,” she said, sounding dejected.

“Well, it shouldn't be. Remember in our fourth year when you tried to make me see Ron's point of view? He was jealous because I always got all the attention, and then I was a school champion. You told me to try and be understanding of how it looked to him.”

“Yes, I do. I also remember you refusing to listen to me about it!” she replied angrily.

“Well, I was wrong. I admit it. And you need to admit it here too. This is just like last year, when Ron made prefect instead of me. At first I didn't want to admit Ron had beat me at something. I was too used to being the special one! We can't go around thinking that everything we do is better than Ron just because I'm famous or you're the best student of our year. If we act like that then we end up being just like Malfoy! Always assuming he's better than the Weasleys, it just makes me sick,” he said firmly.

Hermione looked sick. “Oh, Harry. You're right. I was being so petty. I was thinking there had to be a mistake. You know, that you two couldn't have beaten me on an exam, so there had to be something odd that happened at the Wizarding Examinations Authority. Oh, that's so completely horrible! Can you forgive me,” said Hermione apologetically, grabbing his hand.

“S'okay, Hermione. You can't control what you think,” he said, patting her arm.

“I am proud of him. And of you, Harry. Nine OWLs is fantastic, considering all the distractions you had,” said Hermione.

“Not as good as twelve, but I'll take it,” he said, grinning.

They went up to Ginny's room and Hermione finished unpacking.

Although Harry had already forgotten Hermione's questions about the attack on him and about the wolf guardians, Hermione reminded him as soon as they finished unpacking. “Harry, can you tell me about your being attacked now?” she asked gently.

Harry thought she was being careful because she feared he was going to blow up

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on her like he did last summer, when they'd had the conversation about the Dementors. He moved quickly to quell her fears.

"I'm not going to start shouting again, Hermione, don't worry," he assured her. She smiled in relief. "I wasn't left in the dark as much this time. Mars wasn't hiding things from me like the Order did last year."

Harry described his first month of summer to Hermione: about how nice Dudley had been, and how weird Cho's letter had made him feel. Hermione promised to help him craft a reply. He told her about the night he first met Mars. She look terrified when he told her about being attacked in the alleyway. When he described Tonks being stunned, she cried out. "Oh, no! Is she okay?" she asked nervously.

Harry assured Hermione that Tonks had come out of the scrap with just a few bruises. He described the entrance of Lily and Mars, the odd spell that Mars had used to kill two Death Eaters, and the way his wand transfigured into a sword that reflected the spells back at his opponents. Hermione look deeply interested, but remained silent, so he continued.

When he got to the part about Dudley's letter from Beauxbatons she gasped and looked almost as faint as Harry had felt on seeing the envelope. Harry smiled and didn't immediately tell her that it was a fake. Hermione seemed most shocked, however, when Harry retold Mars' revelation at the Indian restaurant.

"Your relatives were all under the control of Voldemort?" she asked, her face white with anxiety.

"Yes. It was obvious once Mars pointed it out. I almost laughed out loud when Uncle Vernon lectured me about putting business before family," said Harry mirthfully.

"This is no laughing matter, Harry. You could have easily been killed. I didn't think Voldemort could hurt you while you lived with your aunt?" asked Hermione, still looking scared.

“Mars said Dumbledore's ward was failing. He said it could only protect me in or very near the house. He also said Voldemort was much more clever than his Death Eaters and that my muggle family had always been the weakness in the protection. He said the Death Eaters never realized the weakness out until Voldemort came back, because they're so dependent on him. Apparently they were more interested in one-upping each other than in continuing any of Voldemort's goals.” Harry shrugged.

“I would think Voldemort likes keeping them dependent upon him. That would give him more power over them. I doubt he trusts them to do anything except out of fear or for their own thirst for power. They don't strike me as the noblest of people,” Hermione said sagely.

Harry nodded his agreement.

“This Mars seems very sure of himself,” Hermione continued. “He said he had to really twist a few arms. I can only imagine the arm being Dumbledore's if it involved moving you. It must take some nerve to tell Dumbledore that his spell is failing, and then pressure him to accept someone else's plan instead of his,” Hermione added.

Harry thought it was funny hearing Hermione call someone else nervy. He said, “Well, if you'd seen some of the things he did, you'd know why he's so confident.”

“What was the incantation he said in the alley?” she asked.

“Er, something like, 'Displaseol?’”

“How about 'Displacio?’”

“Yeah, that sounds like it.”

“Are you quite sure?”

“Well,” said Harry, “I was rather distracted at the time.”

“That's the incantation for the Displacement Charm. It's a very difficult charm, I doubt we'll ever study it at Hogwarts, but his use of it doesn't match what I've read. It's normally used to clear objects out of your way. It's like the Banishing Charm, but very

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large objects can be displaced. However, you usually don't get much control over the object at all, much less being able to make things swirl about with it," she explained.

Harry was again impressed at how much knowledge Hermione had outside of their schoolwork. Did she do anything but read during the summer? "Hermione, why are you reading about spells that we aren't ever going to study?"

She looked affronted. "Harry, we're only going to be at Hogwarts two more years, and you never stop learning," she said in a superior tone.

Only two more years at Hogwarts? Harry had never looked at it like that before. He had not considered a time could exist when he wouldn't be returning to the castle. Well, except the times he thought he was going to be expelled. He unconsciously smiled.

"Do you think Mars will be at your birthday party tomorrow?" she asked.

"Bill said he was trying to get him to come. Oh, that reminds me, I need to send a letter to Luna," Harry said.

"What on earth for?" asked Hermione harshly.

Harry was taken aback. Just because Luna believed in a few oddball things was no reason to be nasty to her. "Like Ron said, she really wants to meet Mars. Luna and her dad talked about Mars like those Americans you spoke with in California."

"Figures. She'll probably faint when he can't read her mind or tell us all our futures."

"Hermione!"

"Don't think so? You're probably right. Her ridiculous ideas just change when they don't pan out. She won't faint, probably just start thinking up some other rubbish only he can do," Hermione said crossly.

"Can it about Luna, would you? I don't see why you and Ron have to talk so mean about her. She's perfectly friendly to both of you."

"So I've heard."

“Fine,” said Harry, annoyed. “If you're going to be that way, I'll just go send the note by myself.” Harry turned and left Ginny's room for Ron's bedroom to write the note. It was short, and when he had finished he headed for the back porch where the Weasleys kept their owls. Hedwig was happy to see him, and nipped his finger affectionately when he asked her if she would take the note on a short trip. After she flew off, he went back inside, where Hermione was waiting for him in the kitchen.

“Harry, I'm sorry I was so cross about Luna. I know she's your and Ginny's friend. I didn't want to get into row right when I first got here. I'm just anxious after hearing about you being attacked,” Hermione apologized.

“I was anxious when I first got here too. But it's been so much fun being with the Weasleys instead of the Dursleys. You'll feel more relaxed soon,” replied Harry.

“Are you sure you're safe here?” she asked apprehensively.

“Everyone else seems to think so. Dumbledore did agree in the end to let me come,” answered Harry.

Hermione sighed and then said plainly, “That's a lot of trust to put into those wolves.”

Chapter Six – Sumerian Wizards Duel



Harry heard pounding. He thought something was wrong with his head. Why wouldn't it stop? Then he heard a yell.

“Up! C'mon, birthday boy,” said Charlie through the door. “Breakfast is ready, and I don't want you two lallygags to get Mum all cross.”

Charlie's calling brought Ron and Harry into unwilling consciousness.

“What good is it being your birthday if you don't get to sleep in?” grumbled Ron.

Harry grunted an affirmative. They put on their clothes and walked downstairs.

It was quite early, so Bill and Mr. Weasley were still at home eating breakfast with Charlie. Everyone said good morning and “Happy Birthday” as Ron and Harry entered the kitchen and sat down to eat. Mrs. Weasley glanced around the room quickly.

“Those girls still aren't down here?” she said in surprise, and started up the steps to Ginny's room.

“That Lennon woman is making noise again about spies in the Ministry,” said Mr. Weasley. “I understand that You-Know-Who has people on the inside, but she's looking for them in departments that would have little value to them.”

“She's not looking at you, is she, Dad?” asked Charlie.

“No; in fact, she's praised me several times as one of the few people who stood up to Cornelius Fudge when he was claiming that You-Know-Who wasn't back,” answered his father.

“What's the problem then?” asked Ron.

“The problem is that people are starting to think I agree with her methods and accusations. It's common knowledge that she's gathering a faction of powerful witches and wizards together who want Fudge replaced. She's making a lot of enemies. When those enemies hear her referring to me in a positive light, they start thinking of me as their enemy as well. Also, the fact that she's pointing fingers in ridiculous directions for imaginary spies wastes valuable Ministry resources that could be rooting out the actual spies.” Mr. Weasley sighed.

Hermione and Ginny entered the kitchen sleepily, with Mrs. Weasley close behind them. Ginny was so oblivious to her surroundings that she walked into Bill instead of the empty chair next to him. Bill smiled and gently guided his sister into the chair. Hermione managed to walk around the table and sit in between Harry and Ron. She immediately

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reached for the coffee.

Ginny now had her eyes open and was looking across the table at Harry. “Happy Birthday, Harry!” she said, smiling and yawning at the same time. Hermione also wished him happy birthday.

“Bill, did you hear back from Mars? Is he going to make it to the party tonight?” asked Harry.

Mrs. Weasley scowled at the mention of Mars' name as she put sausages on Hermione's plate.

Bill ignored her and answered Harry. “Mars is back in Britain, but he's very busy. He did promise to try his best to come by, even if it's just for a little while.”

“Cool,” commented Ginny. “Luna and Hermione can meet him.”

Harry wasn't sure who was least pleased: Ron, Hermione or Mrs. Weasley.

Soon Bill and Mr. Weasley had finished breakfast and they disappeared off to work. Charlie got up from the table and told everyone, “I'm taking Mars' truck to Diagon Alley to help the twins load up their stuff for the celebration tonight. They seem really excited about your birthday, Harry.”

“What's it going to be?” asked Ginny hopefully.

“Oh no, I am not ruining their surprise, no way. Not with all the nasty things they sell in that shop of theirs.” Charlie waved his hands at his little sister.

Mrs. Weasley grunted unhappily. “Muggles live nearby, Charlie. I'm trusting you to make sure those two don't bring anything too flashy or loud.”

“That's not going to be easy, Mum.” Charlie protested.

“You'll manage,” she said sternly.

Charlie didn't look at all confident of that as he left.

When the morning dishes had been washed and put away, the four teenagers went out to the garden to de-gnome it. Crookshanks was already there, chasing gnomes, when

they arrived. He ran over to Hermione and rubbed against her leg, purring loudly.

They spun the gnomes around to make them dizzy and then chucked them over the hedge. After about forty-five minutes all the gnomes were in the field beyond the hedge, staggering about.

Ginny sighed with annoyance. “We'll just have to toss them out again in two weeks.”

“Maybe not, actually,” interjected Hermione. “Last term, while revising for our Practical Potions OWL, I made a gnome repellent. I've never made one before, so I'm not sure how it turned out. I thought your mum's garden would be the perfect place to test it.” She pulled out a stoppered beaker full of a bright yellow, thick-looking liquid. She walked around the garden and placed two drops at each corner. When she finished, she stoppered the beaker and handed it to Ron. “You should only have to apply the repellent every two weeks.”

Ron looked very impressed as he took the beaker from Hermione. “That was brilliant, Hermione!” he exclaimed.

Ginny and Harry also complimented Hermione on her potion work. She looked quite pleased.

The four then went to the benches in the garden and sat down to chat. It was the first time in a while that all of them had been together on their own, so they talked freely and quickly.

They spoke about some of the awful things that had happened last year: about Umbridge and Grawp, about the Inquisitional Squad and Harry's torture with the blood quill during his detentions. The good parts were discussed as well: Gryffindor winning the Quidditch Cup, Dumbledore's Army, Peeves chasing Delores Umbridge out of Hogwarts by pelting her with a walking stick and a sack of chalk, and half of the members of Dumbledore's Army hexing Malfoy and his cronies into squelchy slug-like

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things.

“Definitely the weirdest year yet,” said Ron.

Harry looked at his three good friends and knew it was time to discuss the death of his godfather with them. Before they had left Hogwarts at the end of the term, Harry had not been able to talk about it, but now that a month had passed, he decided to give it a try.

As soon as Harry broached the subject the others became silent and gave him their complete attention. He could tell they all had wanted to know what happened to Sirius, but they hadn't want to cause Harry more pain, so they had never asked.

Harry started the story at the point right after Hermione had been knocked unconscious by Dolohov. They gasped several times during his description of the battle between the Order members and the Death Eaters in the Death Chamber. When he described Sirius being hit by Bellatrix's stunner and knocked into the black veil, Hermione and Ginny burst into tears. Ginny sobbed and Hermione put her arm around her. Ron seemed to be tearing up too, as he kept wiping his eyes.

Harry then described his chase of Bellatrix up to the Atrium. When he recalled his attempt to torture Bellatrix with the Cruciatus Curse they again all gasped.

“Did it work?” asked Ron, sounding shocked.

“Harry, you didn't?” cried Hermione.

“Well, it knocked her down and it did hurt her some, but not like she had done to Neville. And yes, I did, Hermione! After seeing her threaten to torture Ginny to death, torture Neville and then murder Sirius, I didn't give a damn about Ministry regulations. I wanted her to suffer and die!” said Harry fiercely. “You can turn me in if you like.”

“Don't be ridiculous, Harry!” answered Hermione quickly.

“Then you don't be ridiculous by acting like I did something horrible!” Harry's voice rose. Hermione wisely dropped the subject.

All three were on the edge of the benches as Harry told them about Voldemort's

duel with Dumbledore. When he got to the part when Voldemort had possessed him, the girls shrieked and Ron swore in surprise. Harry finished by relating the discussion he had had with Dumbledore in the Headmaster's office. Harry did not inform his friends that he knew what the prophecy proclaimed: that only he could truly vanquish Voldemort and that neither Harry nor the Dark Lord could live while the other survived. The three of them looked nervous enough as it was, and he didn't want to make it even harder on the people who cared about him.

They all sat in silent reflection after Harry had finished. Ginny stared at him from the other bench. Her eyes were still sprinkled with tears and she looked like she wanted to throw her arms around him in a consoling hug. Harry thought he would rather like her to hug him. He felt very close to all three of them at the moment. Just as Ginny rose off her bench, however, Mrs. Weasley called loudly through the back door that it was time to come inside for lunch.

The morning had flown by so quickly that Harry didn't realized how hungry he was until lunch was mentioned. The four of them walked up to the house and into the kitchen, where sandwiches were laid out on the table for them. Mrs. Weasley poured them tea and sat down herself.

"We'll need to spend the rest of the afternoon decorating and setting up the tables outside. It should be a lovely party," Mrs. Weasley said, humming happily.

Mrs. Weasley was correct, it did take the rest of the afternoon to finish setting everything up. They prepared the refreshments, put up a banner that said, "Happy Birthday Harry, Congratulations Ginny!", moved the tables into the garden, put on the tablecloths, and straightened the house, and after that was done Mrs. Weasley insisted they all get cleaned up and put on semi-formal outfits. When all this was accomplished, it was after five and Bill had already arrived home.

Charlie and the twins drove up in the Hummer at 5:30. All three of them refused to

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give anything away about the entertainment that they had planned. Mr. Weasley apparated home ten minutes later, looking ragged from a hard day's work. Mrs. Weasley insisted that both he and Charlie get cleaned up and changed.

At six the first guests arrived. They were Remus Lupin and Daedalus Diggle; both were bearing birthday presents and congratulated Harry and Ginny. Fleur was next; she handed a present to Harry and kissed both Ginny and him on each cheek, then went off to find Bill. Tonks, Luna and Mad-Eye Moody arrived separately. The next set of guests were a very pleasant surprise to Harry and Ginny: Lee Jordan and Angelina Johnson both appeared at the door with wide smiles.

“Happy Birthday, Harry!” they both said toothily. Each then shook his hand.

“I just knew you be would a prefect, Ginny!” said Angelina, hugging her.

The party was going well; it began to grow dark outside. The refreshments were delicious and the conversations cheery. Lee Jordan was telling Harry and Ron about the joke shop where he worked with Fred and George.

“Business is booming, lads. If this keeps up we'll be buying Zonkos out in a few years,” he bragged.

Tonks and Hermione had just come over to talk to Harry when he heard a familiar booming voice behind him.

“See, Professor, I told you they'd start without us. And you were all worried!” laughed Mars. He was standing at the corner of the house looking into the backyard where the party was taking place. One of his long arms was around none other than Albus Dumbledore, who looked amused.

“They do seem to be enjoying themselves,” answered Dumbledore.

Everyone except Harry, Luna and Moody seemed stunned at the appearance of the latest guests. Harry and Luna quickly walked forward to greet them.

“How are you, Harry?” said Mars, sticking out his hand.

“Just fine! I'm so glad the two of you could make it.” Harry smiled back at both of them.

“Sixteen years, Harry! That's a much longer life than most could manage with Tom Riddle as an arch-enemy. Just remarkable. Thank you so much for inviting me to celebrate with you,” Mars sounded slightly pompous.

Harry wasn't sure what to make of Mars' remark, but he was spared the chore of coming up with a thoughtful reply because Luna nudged him in the ribs.

“Oh yes, Mars. This is my friend, Luna Lovegood. She has been very keen to meet you,” said Harry.

“Hello, Mars,” Luna gushed. “It's very exciting to actually see you in person. I know all about your battles with the Malsumis spirits.” An unusually animated Luna put out her hand.

“You know about the spirits? Is Professor Binns actually teaching something interesting now?” asked Mars humorously as he took her hand to shake it. Dumbledore and Harry smiled.

“I didn't learn about it in class. The Ministry tries to cover up such things,” answered Luna, whose dreamy voice had returned.

Mars did a double take and looked directly into Luna's eyes. His own eyes grew wider and Luna's eyes seemed bigger than ever. With his other hand, Mars moved the hair out of her face. His hand then moved to her shoulder and he knelt on one knee to bring his face level with hers. They stared at each other for a few seconds and then Mars whispered so that only Luna, Harry and Dumbledore could hear him.

“You've got the Eye, haven't you?”

“What do you mean?” Luna whispering calmly.

“The Inner Eye. I see it in you. Ample amounts of talent, yes. You can see things others can't, hear things they cannot hear, feel what they cannot feel and know things

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before they happen. You've done that before, haven't you?" he asked.

"Sometimes, I-I have, yes," said Luna, sounding a little nervous.

"Professor," he whispered, looking up at Dumbledore. "Did you know that you had two of them at Hogwarts?" His right hand pointed from Luna to Harry and back.

"Yes, Mars. Even Sybil could recognize it in these two," said Dumbledore quietly.

"It's a shame you don't have a decent Divination Teacher," commented Mars as he stood up and let go of a glowing yet confused Luna.

"You know as well I that there is only one person in Britain who has the talent to teach that class properly, and they were not interested in the job when it was offered to them," Dumbledore said firmly.

Harry was confused by the conversation. It seemed to him that both Mars and Dumbledore thought he, along with Luna, had the Inner Eye. He remembered Professor Trelawney talking about it. He always thought that having the Inner Eye meant that you had some special insight to things, like a seer. Trelawney was always talking about her Inner Eye, but as far as Harry was concerned she was a right old fraud. Last year Tonks had asked Harry if there was any Seer blood in his family because he had seen in his mind the attack on Mr. Weasley. He had answered no, but he really had no idea if any of his father's relatives were any good at Divination. Dumbledore was as far from being a fraud as anyone Harry could imagine, and Mars certainly didn't strike him as a fraud. Maybe he, and Luna, *could* see and hears things others couldn't?

Other party guests now joined Harry where he stood silently next to Mars and Dumbledore. Charlie and Bill shook Mars' hand and gave him brotherly hugs. Fleur greeted Mars with a "Bon soir mon ami," and kissed him as she had Harry and Ginny earlier. Most everyone had made their way over to greet Dumbledore or Mars, but Ginny, Ron and Hermione all surrounded Harry.

"Are you all right?" Ron sounded concerned.

“Yeah, just thinking a bit,” answered Harry.

“About what Mars did when Luna greeted him?” asked Ginny.

Harry nodded.

“What did they say?” asked Hermione.

“Later,” said Harry, and he pointed at all the people surrounding them.

When the commotion had died down, Mars came over to them and greeted Ron, congratulated Ginny and introduced himself to Hermione.

“Well, Harry, I know Ron's twin brothers have a nice performance to put on for you and Ginny, but I figured I could also help out with the entertainment,” said Mars, looking eager.

“What are you planning, Mars?” asked Ginny eagerly.

“Oh, you'll see very shortly, Ginny darlin’,” he answered.

“Professor Dumbledore,” Mars continued. “What do you say we give everyone a good show to celebrate such a great day?”

“What's in your mind, Mars?” asked Dumbledore.

“Sumerian Wizards Duel. I doubt anyone other than Charlie and Bill has ever seen one.” Mars glowed with anticipation.

“Duel?” questioned several people, including Hermione and Ron.

“It has been years since I've done that. I'm very out of practice...” answered Dumbledore.

“Oh now, Professor, you aren't scared of taking on your old pupil, are you?” asked Mars, barely containing his mirth.

“But I do agree that they would rather enjoy it,” finished Dumbledore with a raised eyebrow.

Both drew their wands, stepped out into an open area, and walked about forty feet apart.

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“They're not really going to duel, are they? I mean with two wizards like that, they could blow up half the neighborhood,” Hermione said nervously.

“No, Hermione, they won't be casting spells at each other,” answered Charlie as he approached their group. “Dueling was a sport to the Sumerian Wizards; no one normally gets hurt. They each wage the battle with a proxy warrior. The closest thing I can compare it to would be having two patronuses battling.”

“Wow,” said Harry, Ron and Ginny.

“Is their proxy warrior the same as their patronus?” asked Hermione.

“Not necessarily. Mars told me you can pick your proxy warrior and you control it completely with your mind. That's the dueling part,” said Charlie.

Mars waved his wand and a large red-gold throne appeared in front of him. He sat in it and faced Dumbledore from forty feet away. Dumbledore made the same motion with his wand and one of his typical chintz armchairs appeared, but before he could sit in it Mars called out to him.

“Professor, by tradition we sit on thrones, remember?”

“Oh yes, but I find these much more comfortable,” he sighed. “For pageantry, though, I guess a throne shall do.” He smiled. He tapped the chair and it turned into a throne covered in purple and white tapestries. He then sat down facing Mars.

With both arms on the rests of their thrones the wizards held their wands straight up in their hands and cried aloud, “Simulacrumi Bellator!” Out of each wand shot out a hominoid figure.

Mars' figure was tall, wearing a helm, breast plate and sandals. It had a bushy beard and had a small shield strapped to its left arm and a spear in its right. The proxy warrior's skin, weapon, armor and hair were all different shades of red.

Dumbledore's proxy warrior was shorter than his red counterpart. It was all white, but its simple robe, sandals and quarter staff were of the same purple as Dumbledore's

robe and hat.

Both figures had trails of wispy smoke that led from them back to their creators' wands. They bowed to the crowd of people in the yard and then to each other.

The red warrior switched to a two-handed grip on its spear, holding it like a staff, and started slowly closing in on its opponent. The white warrior bounced slightly on the balls of its feet as it circled the red.

As soon as the two proxy warriors were within striking distance, the red warrior slashed out at the white, who easily blocked the blow and instantly counter-attacked at the red's knees. Mars seemed to have been expecting this maneuver, because his warrior ignored the impending hit and delivered a shield bash to the white warrior's face. This reduced the effect of Dumbledore's attack greatly, as his warrior was knocked backwards so powerfully that it stumbled and fell onto its back. The white warrior appeared helpless as the red closed in for the quick victory.

The red warrior was within two feet of its prone opponent when it stopped suddenly and backed up a few steps.

Harry was confused. Mars seemed so close to victory, why didn't he press his advantage? Harry heard Charlie and Bill make noises of bewilderment and they both looked confused as their gazes turned to Mars. After a second they returned to watching the proxy warriors and Bill shook his head.

The white warrior had leaped catlike to his feet and was twirling his quarterstaff around impressively as he stalked Mars' now passive warrior. Dumbledore's proxy launched itself furiously onto its opponent, attacking so fast that his staff and arms blurred. The red warrior retreated slowly under the pressure but avoided being struck by any direct blow.

Harry could tell that Mars was hard-pressed just fending off the attacks, while launching virtually none of his own. It seemed only a matter of time before a solid blow

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would land on the red warrior. Only a few minutes later, the top of Dumbledore's staff connected with the red warrior's chest, knocking him back; the lower end of the staff then hit the red warrior's arm, loosening its grip on the spear. Mars' proxy blocked an overhead blow from the white warrior's staff with its shield, but then Dumbledore's warrior landed a front kick in the red's midsection and he fell to the ground, prone and unarmed. The white warrior pointed its staff threateningly at the red warrior of Mars. Slowly, the unarmed fighter raised its arms in surrender, and the match was over.

The white warrior turned and bowed to the crowd, who were all clapping loudly, except Harry, Charlie, and Bill, who merely clapped politely. Mars jumped up from his throne and rushed over to Dumbledore. Mars had an enormous grin and he shook Dumbledore's hand enthusiastically. The thrones and warriors disappeared as the two wizards reached their audience.

“Fantastic, Albus. What a treat we had!” enthused Mr. Weasley.

“You've still got it, Albus!” added Mrs. Weasley.

Mars, who still had his arm around Dumbledore, spoke over the crowd. “There's no shame in losing to the greatest wizard of our time! Harry, Ginny, I hope you enjoyed the performance.”

Harry still suspected that Mars had purposely lost the match, and he watched him from across the yard. Ginny, Luna, Tonks and Hermione went over to Mars and chatted with him for a short while. As he left, both Luna and Ginny gave him a hug. It looked to Harry like Tonks wanted to hug Mars too, but he turned quickly without noticing her and strode up to Harry, Bill and Charlie.

“Old man has still got it. I hope I can do half the stuff he does when I'm 160,” said Mars happily when he reached them.

“Oh, come off it Mars. We saw you let him off the hook.” Charlie sounded annoyed.

Harry and Bill nodded at Mars in agreement.

“You sure about that, bud? Just because he was down doesn't mean he wasn't dangerous. He was setting me up, I tell you. As soon as I'd have gotten close to him he would have kicked me hard in the knee and I'd've fallen over. I remember him taking me out once when I was fourteen with that trick,” retorted Mars.

Neither Charlie nor Bill looked convinced.

“Harry, I'm sorry, but I've got to go now. I have quite a few Donnies under surveillance and tonight it's critical I see to some of the details myself,” said Mars.

“I thought you were going to tell me how your mission in Europe went when you got back?” asked Harry.

“Voice down, Harry,” whispered Bill.

“Don't worry, Harry, I'm back in Britain now. I don't think I'll be leaving for a while. You'll see me in a few days,” replied Mars.

He shook hands with the three of them and walked around the side of the house with Bill.

“I don't buy that 'he was trying to lure me into a trap' bit at all,” said Charlie.

“It didn't sound good to me, either. But you would think he could lie better than that, wouldn't you?” asked Harry.

“He sure can. Probably wants us to know he could have won without saying it.”

“But why would he lose on purpose anyway, Charlie?”

“I don't know, but you can be sure there was a reason behind it. Mars doesn't say a single sentence without a reason. He's very careful in almost everything he does. He'll let us in on it soon though, Harry.”

“You mean he'll let you, Bill and Fleur in on it,” said Harry bitterly.

“No, I don't. Mars made it very clear that you could be told virtually anything we know. He wants you to feel included, and frankly, we agree.” Charlie patted Harry on the shoulder. “Let's get some food, eh?”

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“What's a Donnie, anyways?” asked Harry.

“It's just slang. Donnie-Death-Eater and all that, ” answered Charlie as the two of them made their way to the food table.

Most of the guests were surrounding the table eating and chatting away. Ron asked Dumbledore to sign his special birthday edition Chocolate Frog Card. Tonks, Ginny and Luna were talking amongst themselves and giggling. Lee, Fred and George were preparing for their “entertainment” and everyone else was paired up in discussions.

“Harry dear, why don't you open your presents while we wait for the boys to finish setting up?” asked Mrs. Weasley.

Harry nodded and walked over to the second table where the presents had been placed. He stared at the enormous pile in front of him. After five years of getting presents for his birthday and Christmas, Harry was no longer new to the idea of having presents, but the sheer number that he saw in front of him was impressive. It seemed that everyone at the party had brought him one, and that a few people who could not make it had sent theirs.

He saw Hagrid's present and smiled, remembering that the gentle giant was the first person from the wizarding world that Harry had met, and it had happened exactly five years ago. He wished that Hagrid could have made it to the party. He unwrapped the present and found that it was a wrist watch. Harry's old watch had been broken during the second task of the Triwizard Tournament and he had never replaced it. “Cheers, Hagrid!” he said to himself.

Three other presents that had been sent, however, confused Harry. The first one was from the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge! Harry remembered how nice Fudge had been to him at the Premiership, but he had never expected a birthday present. He opened it and found a quite nice quill and ink set. Well, if the Minister accepted that Voldemort was back and therefore wanted to make peace, that was okay with Harry.

There was also a present from Jo Anne Lennon. This really shocked Harry. He had at least met Fudge a few times, but he had only even seen Lennon once in person, along with 15,000 other people. She certainly didn't strike him as someone he would want to be friendly with, especially after hearing Mr. Weasley's comments. Harry had enough enemies without Lennon making a bunch more for him. He had half a mind to ask the twins to blow up the present during their pyrotechnic show. In the end, however, he decided to open it. It was a quaffle with what looked like the signatures of all the members of the Chudley Cannons! Harry wasn't a fan of the Cannons, but he knew somebody who was. He smiled and put the ball back in the box before Ron could see what it was.

The last present to arrive by post was another surprise for Harry; it was from Cho Chang. This was the best birthday Harry had ever had, but it was also turning into the strangest. Harry wasn't sure if he really even liked Cho any more, but he felt guilty for not writing her back earlier in the summer. He decided he would get Hermione to help him fashion the reply tomorrow. He was starting to unwrap the box when he heard from behind him.

“That one came via owl post this morning,” said Mrs. Weasley, pointing at Cho's box.

“From Cho?” Ginny looked at the tag in surprise. “ ‘Please please write me back soon. Love and Hugs from Cho'? I thought you two had a row to end the term?’ ” She scowled slightly.

“We did. I didn't expect the letter I got from her earlier, much less a birthday present. How does she even know what day my birthday is?” asked Harry.

“C'mon, Harry. You're the Boy Who Lived! They thought about turning your birthday into a national holiday. Everybody knows it,” said Bill who had just returned from around the house.

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“Well, go ahead and open it already,” said an irritated Ginny.

Harry sighed and ripped open the wrapping paper and the box. Something very small rose out of the box and tried to fly away from the table, but Harry's quick reflexes snatched it out of the air. A collective gasp rose around the table.

“What is it?” a few said.

Harry opened his palm slightly and saw a small golden ball, about the size of a walnut, with two flapping wings. It struggled to free itself from Harry's grasp.

“It's a golden snitch! Wow, Cho,” Harry told them, his face glowing. He held it for all to admire and then put in his pocket.

“Open the one from Mars next, Harry. It should be interesting,” said Luna, who had just joined them at the table.

The present from Mars was the largest box on the table. Harry could barely see the top of it as he took off the wrapping paper and opened the box. He could only see what looked like the tip of a glass dome. It was quite heavy and because of the angle Harry knew he would never be able to get it out without unceremoniously dumping it onto the table.

“I could use some help from you tall blokes,” said Harry, smiling at Bill and Ron.

They each went to one side of the box and lifted the object out, groaning. When it was at last exposed, a chorus of “Ooh's” surrounded Harry. Inside a large glass ball was a perfect moving model of the galaxy. Harry had seen a smaller model once when he was in Diagon Alley; he had been sorely tempted to purchase it, but the price was very steep.

Harry's goggling of the ball was interrupted by Bill.

“Harry, get the stand out of the box, this thing is heavy.”

Harry apologized and tipped the box to get the stand. He pulled it and a note out and then put up the stand on the table so Bill and Ron could set the galaxy model down.

“What's the note, Harry?” asked Hermione and Ginny.

Harry read it aloud:

Dear Harry,

I hope you like the model. Astronomy is one the most important subjects they teach at Hogwarts, if not the most. It should come in handy. Please let your friends borrow it on occasion.

Happy 16th Birthday,
Mars

The rest of Harry's presents were also great, if not as flashy as the ones from Lennon, Cho and Mars. Ron had gotten him a large box of Chocolate Frogs, Hermione an enchanted bookmark that would glow just enough to read the book in the dark, the twins gave him some of their newly invented fireworks to test, and Ginny got him a handsome set of cuff links for his dress robes. It took some time to open the rest of his presents and thank the givers, so by the time he was done Fred, George and Lee were ready for the evening's finale.

The fireworks were impressive but much more low key than those at the Premiership. There were a lot of ground blooms and low-flying sparky things that met Mrs. Weasley's demands for discretion. However, a few of the fireworks screamed loudly, earning the twins a nasty scowl. The last bit was a pyrotechnic reenactment of Harry battling the monster of Slytherin, a basilisk. The twins apologized in advance for having Harry kill it with his wand instead of a sword. George said it was just too tricky otherwise.

Everyone seemed very impressed with the show, but the hour was late and the guests slowly trickled out. Dumbledore cleaned up the whole yard with a simple wave of his wand, said goodbye and disappeared with a loud *Crack*.

During the commotion of good night's, Hermione walked up to Harry and Ron,

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who were admiring the galaxy model. Ron was making it zoom certain stars to the forefront and telling the globe to change its perspective.

“Astronomy is going to be a lot more fun with this thing,” declared Ron.

“I wonder,” asked Hermione. “How did Mars know you would be taking Astronomy in your sixth year? I mean you haven't even signed up for the NEWT program, have you?”

Harry shook his head.

“Maybe he thought if Harry had this model he would want to study it. It sure makes Astronomy more interesting to me,” said Ron.

Harry nodded.

“That certainly sounds plausible, but how would he know you had even passed your OWL for Astronomy? We just got the results yesterday.” Hermione sounded puzzled.

Harry glared at her. She had better not be trying to make excuses for having a lower score on the Astronomy OWL than he or Ron. Harry thought he had got that matter settled yesterday.

Hermione must have understood the meaning of his glare because she added quickly, “It's probably nothing. Er, I guess it's time to go to bed. Good night.”

Harry quite agreed with her and he, Ron and Ginny followed her up the stairs and went off to their beds.

Chapter Seven – Mars and The Order



Each morning Harry and Hermione read the Daily Prophet together during breakfast. While Harry had been reading it all summer, neither Ron nor Ginny seemed too interested in the news. Hermione, however, read it very thoroughly and this encouraged Harry to do the same. Hermione was also adept at seeing subtle hints or trends in the paper. For the next few days following his birthday, the Daily Prophet had quite interesting news.

Five known Death Eaters were found dead in an large flat in Bristol. All five sported multiple bruises and broken bones, and all were wandless. The Prophet listed their names, but the only one that Harry or Hermione recognized was Crabbe. His son, Vincent Crabbe, was in the same year as they at Hogwarts, but he was in Slytherin. He

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was one of Draco Malfoy's cronies, who followed Draco around like a bodyguard. The article intimated that the killings were probably part of some rivalry between factions amongst Voldemort's followers. Harry didn't think that was likely, but Hermione found it plausible. "I doubt they're particularly nice to each other, Harry," she commented.

The next day the headlines announced that Cornelius Fudge had created an independent committee in charge of investigating allegations concerning Voldemort's spies in the Ministry. Jo Anne Lennon was, unsurprisingly, named committee chairwoman. It was called the Committee Against Dark Sorcerers (or CADS). The group would have vast powers to investigate, arrest and try individuals named as dangers to public security. Lennon was quoted as saying, "At last the people will know there is some accountability in the Ministry and that the menace of You-Know-Who is being taken seriously. All threats, large and small, will be dealt with."

"The committee is going to try people themselves? What's the point of the Wizengamot if these CADS people are going to be trying the suspects?" asked Harry.

"Maybe the Wizengamot hears the appeal? Though it sure doesn't sound like CADS cares about justice," answered Hermione, frowning.

Harry nodded in agreement. Lennon did not strike him as someone who cared about anything other than being the next Minister of Magic.

After the breakfast dishes were cleaned, Hermione called Harry, Ron and Ginny into the living room.

"You two," said Hermione, pointing at Harry and Ron, "need to fill out your Hogwarts class requests today."

"Oh, come on, Hermione, we have plenty of time," retorted Ron.

"No you don't!" Hermione replied fiercely. "You've been putting this off for days. You read the letters: the OWL results arrived late, and the Hogwarts staff needs the replies as soon as possible. If you don't send your requests in soon, you might not get the

classes you need to become Aurors. Do you want to spend your adult life seating people on the Knight Bus?"

"Okay, okay! We'll fill out the forms," answered Ron grumpily.

Hermione passed out the forms for them to fill out. She scowled at her own form. "You're only allowed to study nine NEWT subjects," whined Hermione.

"Only?" exclaimed Ron.

"It's terrible; I had to drop History of Magic," she pouted.

"It was worth failing my OWL just to get out of that class," said Harry wryly.

Ron and Ginny chuckled, while Hermione looked scandalized. Harry doubted that Hermione could ever think that something good could come out of failing an exam.

"McGonagall told me that to be an auror you needed to get a NEWT in Potions, Transfiguration, Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts. How about we just sign up for those four subjects, Harry?" suggested Ron.

"Only four subjects? That would be pathetic, Ron!" sneered Hermione.

"Well, you don't play Quidditch. It takes a lot of time," retorted Ron.

"I hope you're not planning to put Quidditch ahead of your studies. Your mother would be very disappointed when she found out," Hermione threatened.

From the tone of Hermione's voice, Harry was quite sure Mrs. Weasley would find out very quickly if he and Ron only selected four subjects. He thought he saw an argument brewing, so he piped up.

"Ron, we have to take Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid would be terribly hurt if we didn't take his class, mate."

"That's true enough. Hogwarts wouldn't be the same without Hagrid," agreed Ron.

"There's no way you can drop Astronomy either! You both got O's on your OWLs, and Mars got Harry that wonderful model," Hermione pointed out.

"Yeah, that class should be a breeze now," said Ron.

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Harry nodded agreement. It would be a terrible waste not use the model. Besides, he didn't want to disappoint Mars by not taking his advice on the importance of Astronomy, although Harry didn't really understand why Mars considered it so essential.

“Of course, Herbology isn't too hard and it can come in really handy—” Hermione was saying when Ron interrupted her.

“Forget it, Hermione! Six NEWT classes are enough, and don't even think about getting Mum on your side. Six will be enough for her.”

“Oh well, if you're dead sure?” asked Hermione, disappointed.

“We are!” Harry and Ron chorused.

The three of them finished filling out their school forms and sent them off with Pigwidgeon.

Later that day Harry and Ron were playing wizard chess in the living room while Ginny teased Crookshanks and Hermione hand-knitted more house elf clothes. These peaceful activities were interrupted when Charlie entered the front door and slammed it.

“Have any of you lot seen Bill or Fleur today?” he asked tensely.

They shook their heads, and Ginny spoke up. “I know Fleur's coming to dinner tonight, but she told me that yesterday.”

Charlie looked at the Weasley family clock. The hand for Bill was on “Work.”

“Tell Mum to get in contact with Dumbledore or Moody right away,” Charlie said to Ron.

“What's going on, Charlie?” Ron asked.

“A meeting of the Order of the Phoenix needs to be arranged by tomorrow at the latest. This is awful!” Charlie fretted anxiously.

“What's wrong, Charlie?” asked Ginny nervously.

“Not now Gin, I have to get to Gringotts right away,” and Charlie disappeared with a *Crack*.

“What's going on?” asked Ron.

“Ron, Charlie said tell your mum right away. He seemed very serious,” said Hermione, sounding almost as anxious as Charlie.

“Right!” said Ron, and he sped upstairs.

A few minutes later Ron came back downstairs alone, looking confused.

“Where's Mum?” asked Ginny.

“As soon as I told her what Charlie said, she told me to make sure we all stayed inside the house until she or Dad got back, no matter what. Then she disappeared,” said Ron in a bewildered tone.

“That's all she said?” asked Hermione.

Ron nodded solemnly.

“What's going on?” Harry wondered aloud.

Harry's question seemed destined to go unanswered, as the four of them were left alone in the house for the rest of the afternoon. When Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Charlie, Bill, and Fleur finally arrived at the Burrow, it seemed they had conspired to leave Harry and his friends in confusion. All of them arrived within minutes of each other, and none of them were talking.

After an hour of being ignored, Harry had had enough. With Ginny's help, he cornered Charlie. “Charlie! You told me Mars explicitly said that I was to be kept in the loop. What's going on? Why's everyone acting so odd?” demanded Harry.

“Harry, look, mate, this is different. Dumbledore himself made me swear to keep this under wraps. Dumbledore was mad that I even warned Bill and Fleur, and I did that before he knew himself. I've never seen him so unreasonable,” said Charlie in concern.

“Warned them about what?” demanded Ginny.

“I told you, I'm not allowed to talk about it. We can, however, tell you a few things. Get Ron and Hermione and meet us in the garden in ten minutes, and we'll have

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something for you.” Charlie said, looking around furtively.

Harry and Ginny set off to find Ron and Hermione and after a few minutes found them in conversation by the wolves in the front yard. Harry explained what Charlie had told them and they headed back to the garden together to wait for Charlie. When they arrived in the garden, Bill and Fleur were waiting for them. Bill waved them over so they were out of hearing distance from the house and started speaking.

“Now look, you lot. You need to know right up front that all of us—Mars, Charlie, Fleur and I—agree that you are completely trustworthy. We expect and need your help in this war. But this situation was taken out of our hands. Dumbledore made us swear to keep quiet; not even Mum and Dad know what made Charlie come find us at work today. I can tell you a few things, but before I do, you'll have to swear an oath yourselves. This is not something to take lightly; breaking an oath to Mars is not healthy. Are you interested in entering this pact? If not, you can go back inside and have no worries.”

“A pact? That sounds so diabolical, Bill,” said Hermione nervously.

“What's the oath, Bill?” asked Harry.

“The oath is one of secrecy. The pact, Hermione, is as far from diabolical as you can get. It is an alliance against You-Know—dammit, Voldemort!” said Bill. He pronounced Voldemort's name so venomously that even Harry flinched. “The Alliances' missions and intelligence can no longer be shared openly with the Order of the Phoenix.”

“Why not?” asked Ron.

“E as already told you. Dumbly-dore 'as forbidden us to tell anyone!” said Fleur crossly.

“Any information we give you must be kept amongst our numbers. There are others in the Alliance that you haven't met. If we introduce you to them, they can be trusted also. No one else, though! Not Mum, not Dad, not Hagrid or even Remus. No one—well, except Dumbledore. He and Mars might not always agree, but they trust each other

completely. Are you committed to this?" asked Bill, looking down at them.

Harry, Ron and Ginny quickly agreed. Hermione, however, looked doubtful as she rubbed her chin with her hand. "I still don't understand why Mars isn't in the order?"

"Three members blocked his entry. Didn't Charlie tell you lot that?" he answered.

"He did, Bill. What's the problem, Hermione?" asked Harry, annoyed.

"The problem is," Hermione said firmly, "that I can't see any reason why two groups totally dedicated to the same thing should be at such odds with each other."

"There's a damn good reason, Hermione, but if you want to hear it you have to swear the oath. If you have doubts," Bill pointed at the house, "go back inside and don't let these affairs bother you." He stared directly at Hermione.

Hermione looked torn between loyalties. Harry, however, didn't see it that way. The Order had rejected Mars and him. The only logical choice was to start up his own resistance. Last year, Hermione had helped organize Dumbledore's Army; how was this any different?

Hermione turned slowly, looking at Ginny, Ron and Harry in turn. Each of them met her gaze determinedly and after a few seconds she answered Bill.

"Okay, I'm in."

Bill made them swear the oath officially, which they all did quickly. His face looked pale and worried.

"Charlie, Fleur and I are in the Order as well as the Alliance of Mars. We make sure that we keep each group's secrets to themselves. Only Dumbledore and Mars discuss things relating to both groups. I have a feeling that after the meeting tomorrow, however, the Order will isolate us some from the rest of the group."

"Why?" asked Hermione.

"Mars found out that there is a spy in the Order who has informed Voldemort of the identities of the Order's members and almost everything that they've planned,"

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answered Bill coldly.

They all gasped.

“Who is it?” asked Harry and Ron.

“Is he sure?” asked Hermione.

“We're completely positive, Hermione. Mars told Dumbledore and gave him irrefutable proof. Charlie was there with them, and Mars demanded that Dumbledore expel the spy from the Order immediately. Dumbledore refused and told them that they could handle it themselves,” answered Bill.

Fleur growled at Bill's last sentence.

“What do they mean, handle it?” demanded Ginny.

“They should do more than throw the spy out!” blurted Ron.

“Dumbledore insisted that he and the spy could work things out. Then he made Charlie swear not to tell anyone else who the spy was,” said Bill.

“That doesn't make any sense. Why would Dumbledore protect a spy?” asked Hermione.

“It makes perfect sense, Hermione. Dumbledore's greatest weakness and strength is his willingness to trust. He has many friends and allies because he gave them a chance when others wouldn't, but he's gone off the deep end here. He refuses to cut him loose. So you can see why you can't pass on any information to other members of the Order. They might tell the spy! Only Dumbledore knows who it is or that he even exists.

“There'll be a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix here tomorrow night. It won't deal with the spy, but Mars will be addressing the Order before the meeting. He'll share some intelligence with them, but much less than we'd planned. We're going to have to work much harder now. You can ask Mars after the meeting if you have any more questions.

“We need to get back inside before Mum gets too suspicious,” finished Bill. He and

Fleur then walked up to the house.

“I bet it's Snape!” said Ron eagerly. “No wonder he blackballed Mars from joining the Order. He knew Mars would see right through his evil self.”

“Yeah; it didn't help, though, did it? Mars still tagged him as a Death Eater,” Harry agreed.

“When will you two learn? This is the fifth time you've both labeled Snape a Voldemort supporter, and every other time you've been shown to be completely wrong. Dumbledore trusts Snape, and that should be good enough for you,” snapped Hermione.

“Well, it's not good enough any more. You heard Bill; Mars gave Dumbledore irrefutable proof that someone in the Order was a spy, but Dumbledore still insisted on trusting them. Dumbledore didn't dispute the facts Mars gave him, Hermione, he just chose to keep trusting the spy anyway. That strikes me as misplaced trust,” said Ginny firmly.

Harry and Ron nodded agreement with Ginny and all three stared at Hermione.

“Well, we'll just have to find out then. We've sworn not to tell Snape anything, so there's no way we have to worry about trusting him,” she shrugged.

“It's not us trusting Snape that I worry about,” said Harry gravely as they headed back to the house.

The next day was quite tense in the Burrow. Harry could not concentrate on anything. All he could think of was seeing Mars that night to ask him about the spy. The morning seemed to drag out forever, and no one spoke much. At lunch, Mrs. Weasley announced that a meeting of the Order would be taking place before dinner that night, so everyone should dress well.

Shortly after Mr. Weasley, Bill and Fleur arrived at the Burrow after work, the Order members started arriving. Lupin, Moody, Dedalus Diggle, Elphias Doge, Emmeline Vance entered the Burrow, followed by Mad-Eye Moody, Tonks and Kingsley

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Shacklebolt.

Tonks and Moody came straight over to greet the four teenagers.

“Wotcher, Harry,” said Tonks brightly. She shook his hand and hugged Hermione and Ginny.

“Been keeping your head low this summer, Potter?” asked Moody in his gravelly voice.

“I’ve tried to, honestly,” replied Harry earnestly.

“Not easy being a marked man, is it? Well, it should be pretty interesting with Mars back in town, eh? I always liked that kid,” said Moody.

“Speaking of Mars, is he here yet?” asked Tonks hopefully.

“Not yet, Tonks,” answered Ginny, smiling at her.

A few minutes later, Fred and George Weasley showed up. Harry was mildly surprised to hear that they had joined the Order. Right after the twins were Hestia Jones and Sturgis Podmore. Snape then arrived by himself. He entered the house, greeted Mr. Weasley stiffly, and sneered at Harry and Ron, who were in a corner of the living room.

“Stupid git,” muttered Ron as Snape left the room.

“I don’t care for the grot myself, but he has been valuable on occasion,” murmured Moody.

Harry smiled; he liked knowing how many people detested Snape besides himself and Ron.

“Just waiting on Dumbledore himself, now, I guess,” Moody growled.

“And Mars, Mad-Eye,” added Tonks.

As Tonks finished speaking, there was a knock at the door. Bill answered it and greeted Dumbledore and Mars, asking them in. All eyes were on the pair of them and a few people issued greetings. Mrs. Weasley entered from the kitchen and called above the chatter: “We’re a little late getting started, so we should hurry a bit. Albus, could you

help with the seating arrangements?"

Dumbledore smiled at her and waved his wand around. A large table appeared in the middle of the living room with seats all around it. Harry was not sure what had happened to the furniture that had been there, but right now he wasn't concerned about that. He, Ron, Ginny and Hermione all headed for empty seats.

"What do you lot think you're doing?" exclaimed Mrs. Weasley.

"We're sitting down for the meeting," said Harry bravely.

Mrs. Weasley replied, "Don't be ridiculous, Harry dear. You have enough to worry about. I want all of you upstairs this instant!"

Immediately noises of protest came from Ginny, Ron, Hermione and Harry.

"Mum, we're not children anymore!"

"Don't you think we should know what's .."

"You are SO unfair!"

"Mrs Weasley, how fragile do you think I am?"

"I'll not have any arguments about this in my house! UPSTAIRS!"

Just as Harry was about to admit defeat and head for the steps, a large and powerful hand squeezed his shoulder.

"Molly, these young adults," said Mars, beaming as he waved his other hand at Harry and the others, "have more than proved their merit in the war against Tom Riddle." The four teenagers glowed at this pronouncement. "Surely including them in the meetings would be—"

"Mars! You stay out of this!" shrilled Mrs. Weasley, shaking her finger up at Mars, who towered over her. "I will not be told how to treat my own children by a ... a ... with all due respect, by a desperado!"

"Desperado?" Mars smiled. "That may be the nicest thing you ever said about me."

"This is no joke. I know they're not children, but Mars," she said desperately, "how

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can you be so cruel as to subject them to this?"

Harry started to object, but Mars cut him off.

"ME subject them? Their suffering comes from our enemy! I only want to give them their best chance for survival."

"Survival?!?! You *are* cold blooded! Right! You lot, UPSTAIRS! NOW!" said Mrs. Weasley with a finality that left no room for debate.

The group all gathered in Ron's bedroom, murmuring in dissent. Harry put his face in his hands and wondered what he had to do to be taken seriously by adult wizards. Surely he had proved himself more times than most. This was ludicrous. He was quite fond of Mrs. Weasley, but her mollicoddling was getting very annoying.

"Ron, do you have any of the twins' extendable ears handy?" asked Hermione.

Before Ron could answer, a small woodpecker flew in the window and landed on Ginny's arm. Ginny was paralyzed in shock and delight and everyone but Harry sucked in their breath. He said, "That's Lilandria! She is Mars' ... bird, or friend, or something."

The bird hopped up Ginny's arm and gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek. The woodpecker then hopped onto her shoulder, and out of its mouth they heard Mars' voice. "Molly, I want to restate my objection to leaving these teenagers out of the loop. I think it's insane to pretend they don't know what is going on. This is not protecting them at all."

"I agree, Mum," they clearly heard Bill say. "Why keep them in the dark? Surely the truth is superior to the rumors that they'll hear?"

"That's enough!" wailed Mrs. Weasley. "Albus agreed to my demands, and I will hear no more arguments. Mars, you are lucky just to be allowed in this house."

"Ahem," Dumbledore's voice was heard. "Mars, I think it's time we heard the intelligence you've gathered on Voldemort since you arrived back in Britain."

Harry heard several people from the table murmur at the sound of Voldemort's name. However, neither Ron nor Ginny flinched. He looked at them with respect and

noticed that Hermione was looking at Ron with surprise and the same respect in her eyes.

"Okay," said Mars quickly. "I'll jump right into it. There are many small-scale plots, but today I'll concentrate on the four items that have dominated their efforts this summer.

"One: Riddle spent three weeks in Eastern Europe recruiting. I do not know all the wizards he visited, but I have a partial list here." Harry heard paper rustling.

"I don't know who on this list was merely visited or actually signed up. I lost Riddle after three days in Belarus."

"Then how do you know how long he was there and who he saw?" asked George Weasley.

"I had a chat with a Donnie in London three and a half weeks later," replied Mars.

A chair was heard scraping the floor. "Chatting with Death Eaters, are you now?" thundered a voice that had to be Kingsley's.

Mars shot back, "Sit down, Kingsley. I can assure you that he didn't enjoy our conversation." Mad-Eye Moody's gravely chuckle could be heard at this. "I caught him trying to use the Imperious Curse on an official from the Ministry of Law Enforcement. A few drops of veritaserum later and I had this list. However, he didn't know much more than I've already mentioned. He was kept very much in the dark."

"Secrecy, even from his own followers, has always been a hallmark of Voldemort's," said Dumbledore.

"The use of veritaserum is very restricted by the Ministry, you know, Mars," said a voice that Harry recognized as belonging to one of his least favorite people—Severus Snape.

Harry scowled and heard Ron fume, "Mum tells off Mars and welcomes that git Snape, it's—"

"Shh!" the girls on both sides of Ron hissed.

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"Feeling sorry for one of your old buddies, are you, Severus?" scoffed Mars. "He told me a lot more than you've gotten out of them!"

Harry grinned and met Ron's eyes. Harry could tell from Ron's face they were both in agreement that Mars' last statement confirmed Snape was indeed the spy.

"He's no better than the ones he hunts, Headmaster. Laws aren't meant for marvelous Mars, are they? Send him back to Texas!" cried Snape. A few voices mumbled in agreement.

"Severus, Mars has traveled thousands of miles to help us. He has skills and talents shared by no one else at this table. His assistance will be invaluable. Kindly do not interrupt his report again," said Dumbledore calmly.

Mars continued his report. The second point he brought up was that quite a few officials in the Ministry had been bribed or were under the Imperious curse. Many others there seemed terrified and were looking to Jo Anne Lennon for leadership instead of the Minister of Magic.

Thirdly, Mars reported that forty or so giants were in the mountains near Tomintoul, awaiting orders to attack an as-yet-undisclosed location in Scotland.

The fourth item on Mars's agenda was Igor Karkaroff. At least six Death Eaters had been sent to hunt Karkaroff in Denmark. Mars informed the Order that he had followed them and managed to get to Karkaroff first.

"He was very hesitant to trust me," said Mars.

"Hardly surprising," said Dumbledore mirthfully.

"I negotiated an agreement—a, er, magically binding contract with him. Briefly, it means I get information and insights from him, and from me he gets protection," Mars explained.

"Just like the Mafioso, eh Mars?" quipped Kingsley.

"Give him a break!" Tonks interjected.

“I—uh,” Mars hesitated, “took him to a safe place. He was much more informative than the other Donnie, but some of what he said was a bit dated.

“No Donnie should be allowed to walk, I say, but on rare occasions you have to let one live—for a while, anyway,” Mars finished coldly. Harry could guess at whom he was staring.

“Not if you give *me* his address, Mars,” said Moody with a laugh. “*I* didn't sign any contracts.”

Mars replied, laughing also, “Oh, you were in his thoughts, Alastor. Not revealing his location was obviously part of the deal. I've told Professor Dumbledore all the interesting things Karkaroff had to say, and I'm sure he can fill your group in on what he thinks is relevant.

“The last thing I want to add is not about what Riddle and his henchman are doing, but about their change in philosophy. Up to now, it seems their plan was purely logical. Get intelligence, get power over people, and create disarray in their foes. However, I think his plans are turning personal.”

“Personal? What's that rubbish supposed to mean?” snorted Snape.

“It means, Severus, that Riddle is now out to hurt Harry Potter merely to make him suffer. When I first arrived in Britain I found out all I could about Harry. He is very close to the Weasley family, and also to Miss Hermione Granger. After all the humiliations that Harry had given Riddle, I wondered if Riddle would strike at Harry's friends because Harry was so well protected. Tom Riddle is a twisted man, and I thought his vindictiveness could give me a lead. Sure enough, I discovered that the Weasley's house was being watched. I then worried most gravely for the Grangers. She's muggleborn, you know. What could they do if Riddle wanted them dead? I found out where she lived and scouted the area. Two ugly old witches were plainly spying on her family. Their invisibility made them careless and I easily spotted them. I watched them for two days as

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they spied on the Grangers. I didn't know if your Order had sent them to protect the Grangers or if they were Riddle's. I didn't dare expose myself, so I just observed them. Finally, on the second day Hermione and her parents drove off from their house in their Austin Martin. The witches followed on their broomsticks, and when the car reached the freeway and was going at high speed, one of the witches jinxed their car so that it headed straight towards oncoming traffic.”

As Mars said this, Hermione gasped, and Harry saw she had turned white and put her hands over her mouth. She leaned into Ron's shoulder, trembling from head to toe.

“I reacted instinctively and hexed both witches off of their brooms. Mr. Granger must be a great driver, because he avoided crashing and the Grangers continued on their way,” finished Mars.

“Who were the witches?” asked Mr. Weasley.

“Hard to recognize them after a fall from that height, Arthur.”

Several murmurs of disgust were heard from both the meeting room and Ron's bedroom.

“If you didn't kill every Death Eater you saw, we *might* be able to question a few of them, Mars,” Kingsley commented. “Severus has got Mars tagged correctly, Dumbledore. He's a bloodthirsty bounty hunter. He's spent more time with demons than humans over the past decade.”

“Would it 'ave been better for 'eem to let ze Grangers die, meester Shacklebolt?” asked Fleur angrily.

“I'm sorry I couldn't question them, Kingsley. I would have loved to discover if they were really working for Riddle or were being forced to kill under the Imperious curse, but I had to act quickly. I didn't dare risk the Granger's lives further,” added Mars with sincerity in his voice.

“The Order thanks you deeply for your alliance in this war, Mars. Your wolves

outside are a magnificent achievement. Some of the best transfiguration I have ever seen,” said Dumbledore.

“It is *the* best I've ever seen,” added Minerva McGonagall. “I am quite impressed, Mars.”

Harry could almost hear Mars' smile.

“Clearly, we should have seen the risk to Harry's friends and their families,” Dumbledore continued. “Voldemort will have good intelligence on whom Harry is friends with from the children of his servants at Hogwarts. Remus, I would like you to look into the monitoring of Harry's friends in the future.”

“I'll get right on it,” answered Lupin.

“Well, if that is the end of your report, Mars, I think that it is best you be going,” said Mrs. Weasley. “We need to start the Order's meeting, and you obviously are not part of the Order...”

“Mother!” cried Charlie and Bill together.

“Why do you treat him like that?” exclaimed Bill.

“No need to make waves over me, Bill,” Mars interjected. “I respect your parents' wishes in their house. I'll leave, Molly. I'll just go upstairs and wait for dinner.”

Lilandria was now silent. Harry looked over at Hermione and noticed Ron had put his arm around her protectively. Ginny too was staring at her. Harry felt wretched that being his friend had endangered Hermione's family. Harry knew Hermione was tough, clever, and brave enough to handle whatever Voldemort threw at her, but her muggle parents? It was unthinkable evil to threaten them. Mars had guessed it, though. Why hadn't anyone else?

“I remember the day Daddy's car lost control,” said Hermione in a small voice. “We were very scared. I didn't have my wand with me. We were just going out to eat.” Hermione sniffled loudly and then continued. “We thought something had simply gone

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wrong with the steering. I had no idea it was a jinx. If Mars hadn't been watching our house...”

Hermione's recollection was interrupted by a knock at the door. Harry knew who it was and didn't want to make Hermione move from Ron's arms, so he jumped up to answer the knock. As he expected, Mars' tall frame filled the doorway.

“Can I come in, Ron?” asked Mars politely.

“Course you can,” answered Ron quickly.

“I'm sorry they kicked me out before they started their official meeting. I had hoped y'all would get to listen in on it, but your mother,” Mars looked at Ron, “is still pretty mad at me.” Mars closed the door behind him.

Ginny got up from Ron's bunk and walked over to Mars, looking straight up into his eyes. “I'm very sorry our mum was so rude to you. She, Kingsley, and Snape had no reason to be so—”

“Oh, Ginny, don't concern yourself,” said Mars. “Your mom has plenty of reasons to be sore at me. I completely understand how she feels. Kingsley is so straight-laced I doubt his own mom doesn't get on his nerves. And I consider it a point of pride that the louse named Severus Snape hates me.”

Ron, Ginny and Harry all grinned broadly at this remark. Hermione, however, kept her face buried in Ron's chest. She was still trembling, but not as badly as before.

“Who was the Death Eater that you caught trying to curse the Ministry official?” asked Ginny.

“A greasy thug named Geoff Reynolds. More wand than brains, if you ask me. Any of y'all ever hear of him?” asked Mars.

Ginny, Harry and Ron all shook their heads.

“Harry,” said Mars, “I'll be back in three days to see you.”

“Thats' great!” Harry smiled. Ron too had a smile on his lips.

“I’ll be giving you Occlumency lessons for the rest of your summer vacation,” added Mars.

Harry was taken aback. His Occlumency lessons from Snape last year had been some of the worst experiences of his life. He finally managed to blurt out, “But they didn’t help last year!”

“Harry,” said Mars kindly, “I know Severus really messed up your lessons last year. But I promise mine won’t be so awful. Your Headmaster should never have trusted a vindictive S.O.B. like Snape to give you such important training. Professor Snape only weakened you to Riddle’s interference. Not only is Occlumency much easier when the student and teacher do not despise each other, but I’m a better teacher than Snape and I am much more experienced with Occlumency. Trust me, you’ll learn fast and probably enjoy your lessons.”

Harry managed a smile at Mars. He did feel more comfortable about learning Occlumency, but his memory of Voldemort tricking him last year, and how it led to his godfather’s death, was prominent.

Mars had turned to leave when Hermione finally spoke. “Mars,” she said, with her face still in Ron’s chest. “Thank you so much for looking out for my family.” She then lifted her head, but kept her arms around Ron. “Without you, we’d be—”

“Don’t dwell on it. It’ll just depress you, darlin’,” interrupted Mars. “No muggle family in Britain is safer. I have two witches and magical wards protecting your family. *I* think of these things, Hermione. I do have a bad rep with many people you respect, but I can promise you that I will never let you down.” Mars’ eyes reflected confidence as well as concern. “I’m sure you’ll all have questions, and when I return in a few days I promise to answer them.”

Lilandria flew from Ginny’s shoulder and landed on the back of Mars’ neck.

“Aren’t you staying for dinner?” demanded Ginny.

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“Oh yes, Ginny. I am just going to look around your perimeter for a while,” Mars answered.

“Why?” asked Harry. “Is something out there?”

“No, no...nothing like that. I just want to walk by myself for a while. Severus can really get me riled up,” Mars smiled.

Mars quickly turned and left. The scene was quite surreal to Harry. Hermione vulnerable, Ron protective and even affectionate, and Ginny mature beyond her years. Harry's brain raced with ideas. They all centered around Mars. How could Mars protect the Weasleys, the Grangers and Harry all at the same time? Didn't Mars say he had just arrived in Britain from Texas? How did he get two witches to watch over Hermione's family, AND follow Voldemort through Eastern Europe, AND track down Karkaroff AND spy on the evil giants in Tomintoul? It was simply impossible. Harry put his head in his hands again and tried to imagine how Mars could manage all this and teach him Occlumency at the same time. It simply did not add up. Mars had to be lying about something, but Harry could not help but trust everything Mars said as the absolute truth.

Hermione seemed much calmer now and after a few minutes she sat up on her own. She and Ginny were now talking about Mars' bird. Ron, like Harry, looked lost in thought. Soon all four teenagers were discussing what they had heard in Mars' briefing. Ron and Ginny seemed simply amazed by Mars. Hermione seemed impressed, but Harry got the feeling that she too wondered how one wizard could manage all those feats.

About forty minutes later, Charlie knocked at Ron's door to fetch them for dinner. Compared to the hostility Mars had faced in the pre-meeting, dinner must have seemed like Christmas. Ginny and Fleur fussed over keeping his dinner plate full, ignoring Mrs Weasley's sneers; Bill made sure to pour him a nice large jigger of Firewhiskey, and Dumbledore and Mad-Eye traded lots of jokes with him. Snape and Kingsley were not among those who had stayed for dinner, so the Mars-bashing was minimal.

Tonks, too, seemed to have taken a liking to Mars. She tried often to speak to him, but it was difficult because Ron and Hermione seemed to be fighting for his ear. Mars made the mistake of saying he wanted to hear about Ron's great saves to win the Quidditch cup for Gryffindor last year. After a few minutes, Harry rescued Mars from some of Ron's more boring points by asking Mars what the Malsumis Spirits looked like that he'd fought in the American West. Mars was about to answer Harry when Hermione moved in.

“Mars, when my family was in California I discovered that House Elves had recently been freed from enslavement in parts of America,” Hermione announced.

Most of the diners at the table rolled their eyes or moaned at this. She simply ignored them, however, and stared at Mars.

“Oh yes, about six years ago the clans in the South West and North West passed laws freeing all house elves,” answered Mars. “It was about time, if you asked me. I had been calling for it for years.”

Hermione's eyes widened with excitement. She began to describe her views on house elves, to explain about S.P.E.W., and to complain about how few people in Britain even thought about the suffering of the house elves. She glared at Ron and Harry several times during this conversation. Harry concentrated on chatting with George and Bill and tried to ignore her nasty looks. Mars expressed interest in what Hermione had to say about House Elves and chatted away with her. A few minutes later Hermione asked Mars if would join S.P.E.W., and to Harry's surprise Mars gladly accepted the invitation.

“I'll just nip upstairs and fetch you a badge,” said Hermione, rising excitedly.

“Oh, there's no need, Hermione. I can change the shape of one the charms I wear on my jacket. This one,” Mars said, tapping a silver charm that was a circle with a unicorn inside of it, “is superfluous since I added this guy down here,” and he touched a pewter charm of a red rose with a bumblebee in it. Mars pulled out his wand and tapped

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the silver charm, which changed into a circle with the letters S.P.E.W. twinkling in it. Mars smiled at Hermione.

“Oh Mars, that's wonderful!” exclaimed Hermione.

Harry exchanged doomed looks with Ron. They both knew Hermione's enthusiasm for S.P.E.W. had probably just been redoubled. Many boring lectures loomed in their futures. The rest of the conversations, however, were more to Harry's liking. Dumbledore was not ignoring him like last year, and Professor Lupin asked a lot of questions about the Dark Arts Defense Club that Harry had led.

“Harry, I'm so proud of you, teaching that class on your own and in the face of that wicked Umbridge. That took great courage and foresight,” Lupin enthused.

“Well, Hermione,” said Harry, “—er, and Ron—,” he added, as Ron glanced at him, “persuaded me to teach the class.”

“Well, I'm proud of the lot of you,” said Lupin. “We could never have expected such a fantastic resistance to Umbridge's horrible regime at Hogwarts.”

“I concur, Remus. Your performance was both brave and brilliant, Harry. I have never been prouder of my pupils,” said Dumbledore, beaming. The twins, Ginny, Harry, Ron and Hermione all basked in his praise. Arthur and Molly Weasley looked proud.

Hermione and Ron returned to fighting over who would engage Mars in conversation. Ginny chatted with Bill and Fleur, while Charlie and Harry quizzed the twins on their joke shop.

The food at the dinner table was as good as the conversation. Mrs. Weasley had done a superb job, and she even managed a smile at Mars when he thanked her for such a wonderful meal. Harry and the other guests all then bestowed great thanks on Mrs Weasley and Fleur (who had helped quite a bit), who both looked pleased.

The conversations wound down along with Harry's energy. He was quite sleepy. Dumbledore may have noticed this and he spoke. “Mars, will you and Alastor

accompany me to Hogwarts? I have a few things I want the both of you to look at. Mars, you have been quite difficult to pin down lately.”

“Of course,” said Mad-Eye and Mars together.

As Mars, Dumbledore and Moody, were leaving Bill called out.

“Mars,” said Bill with his arms around Fleur's waist, “We forgot to invite you to our wedding next month. It's at Hogwarts. We would be so happy if you could come.”

Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione all glanced carefully at Mrs. Weasley. Her lip curled, but her face was not too furious, and she remained silent. Clearly Bill had warned her of this earlier, thought Harry.

“Oh, I'd be honored,” said Mars. “Thanks a million for the invite.” Mars left the room to catch up with Dumbledore, as the rest of the guests either left or started to help with the cleanup.

Chapter Eight – Percy Persecuted



It had been four days of bad news since the order's meeting at the Burrow. Jo Anne Lennon and her Committee Against Dark Sorcerers had made the front page of the Daily Prophet each morning, announcing new conspirators that had been discovered inside the Ministry, Gringott's, St. Mungo's, and other organizations. The first day's news had sent the Weasley household into chaos: Percy had been arrested. He was accused of being a spy for Voldemort; a picture of Percy in manacles being led through the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was part of the lead story.

Percy's relationships with Bartemius Crouch, Sr. and Delores Umbridge showed he was a supporter of You-Know-Who, the article claimed. As Crouch's personal assistant two years ago, Percy would have known that Crouch was under the Imperious Curse, so

obviously he was guilty. The article intimated that Percy had assisted in the attack on Crouch, Sr., helping Crouch's son, one of Voldemort's most loyal followers, to subdue his father. Umbridge had earlier been sentenced to six years in Azkaban for aiding Voldemort by hiding facts that would show proof of his return. The article not only accused Percy of being a close confidant of Umbridge, but hinted that he was probably the mastermind behind the entire plot to obscure the truth of Voldemort's return and prevent the preparation of defenses. He was to be tried by a closed-door tribunal immediately.

Harry and Hermione wondered how Fudge had escaped any blame when he was the one who ordered Umbridge to conceal the truth in the first place. The Weasleys, however, could only worry. Though Percy had infuriated them all when he disowned his family to advance his career, they knew he was no Voldemort supporter. Even Fred, George and Ron, who were embarrassed to have Percy as a brother, were furious at this miscarriage of justice.

Mrs. Weasley was simply inconsolable. She was constantly on the verge of tears and was prone to staring blankly at the walls for hours at a time. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had taken to doing more and more of the household chores because she could not concentrate. Ron often complained about the workload, but Hermione and Ginny would guilt him into silence. Harry was glad to help the Weasleys in any way he could. He didn't like Percy any more than did Ron, Fred or George, but seeing Mr. and Mrs. Weasley so distraught tore his insides apart. Harry hated this feeling of powerlessness more than anything else he had ever felt before.

The news two days later, however, brought a new low point to the Weasley family. Lennon was quoted as saying that she would seek the use of the newly reinstated death penalty in the case of Percy Weasley. She claimed that its use was indicated because Percy had enabled the escape of Barty Crouch, Jr., and the return of Voldemort, resulting directly in the murders of two people, Crouch, Sr., and Cedric Diggory. Mr. Weasley now

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had bags under his eyes, which were constantly red. Ginny was often in tears, and Mrs. Weasley was in such a state that she rarely moved or spoke. Harry's feelings of impotence grew and even Hermione seemed at a loss for ideas. Dumbledore and Mr. Weasley were leading a furious effort to get Percy's trial in the open so they could present testimony, but it seemed to be going nowhere.

The day after Lennon's threat to use the death penalty, Harry and the others were cleaning up the kitchen and Mrs. Weasley was sitting at the table staring out the window, silent tears rolling down her face, when a loud *CRACK* was heard from the living room. Everyone, even Mrs. Weasley, hurried into the next room to see who had apparated. Bill stood there with his wand out and his eyes blazing in fury.

“Where's Charlie?” he demanded loudly.

“Upstairs,” answered Ginny and Ron.

“Go get him now, Ron! Hurry, I mean it. Tell him to bring his wand.”

If Ron wondered why the hurry, he didn't show it, but immediately sped up the stairs towards Charlie's room.

“What is it, Bill?” cried Mrs. Weasley, her first coherent sentence of the day.

“I just got word from Mars; they're going to execute Percy in half an hour! They're using the old Death Chamber in the Department of Mysteries,” said Bill fiercely.

“What?!?!?” stammered Hermione and Harry.

“They can't!” yelled Ginny.

“Oh Bill, what will we do?” sobbed Mrs. Weasley.

“Mars has a plan, Mum. We're *not* letting this happen. Where's Charlie, dammit?” asked Bill.

“Bill, how will you—” Ginny started to ask.

“Quiet, everyone! I need to get my head around this. No one talk till Mars gets here,” said Bill angrily.

Charlie and Ron sprinted into the room. Charlie had his wand in one hand and was carrying two neck chains, each sporting two gold medallions, in the other.

“Are we busting out Perce?” panted Charlie.

“Yes! Mars'll be here any minute. He's scouting out the ambush site and deactivating the defensive charms. Good thinking in bringing the charms,” said Bill, as Charlie handed him one. They each put a chain over their heads.

“How long have you been planning this?” asked Ron.

“I said no talking, Ron!” snapped Bill.

Ron backed away, looking apologetic. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were both now tearing up and Hermione was biting her nails. Harry's stomach turned over and over and he thought he might be sick any second. Then he heard another loud apparating *CRACK* and Mars appeared before them. Charlie and Bill turned to him and he nodded at them.

“They leave the cells with Percy for the Death Chamber in ten minutes. The best ambush spot will be in the circular room that connects everything in the Department of Mysteries. Can you two place that in your minds?” asked Mars.

Charlie and Bill both nodded, looking grim. Mars turned and looked at Ginny and Ron.

“This place won't be safe for Percy to stay once we get back. Collect some clothes, books and other things that Percy might want while he's in exile. Go on, hurry.” Mars made a shooing motion.

Ginny and Ron obediently took off in different directions.

“Oh Mars! Do you think you'll be able to rescue him?” asked Mrs. Weasley tearfully.

“We have a good plan, Molly. Your kids are very brave. Just be ready when we return in twelve minutes or so,” Mars answered. He then turned to Bill, looking as if he

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was about to say something, but Harry spoke up first.

“Mars, take me with you. I want to help!” said Harry. “Please let me, I know I can be of use.”

“Me too, Mars!” piped Hermione.

Charlie and Bill looked ready to tell them off but Mars smiled and put a large hand on each of their shoulders. He replied, “If you two could apparate you can bet I'd want you along, but we have to be fast and we three have been planning this since Percy was arrested. We can't risk changing anything in the plan at the last minute.”

Harry instantly felt his apprehension disappear. He was sure now that Mars and the Weasleys would rescue Percy cleanly and everything would be all right. He should have known all along that Mars would come and stop the madness. Harry looked at Hermione, and she, too, looked calmer as she gazed at Mars with wide eyes.

“OK, remember: wait 'till the door closes behind them. Hit them with stunners immediately. Even if you have to hit Percy, it's all right, we can revive him. My contact says there'll be five guards, so we have to be quick. Once the guards are down, one of you grab a wand for Percy and the three of you disapparate back here. Then get Percy ready to leave so when I make it back we can leave the Burrow quickly. Got all that?” asked Mars.

Everyone in the room nodded. Mrs. Weasley kissed both her sons goodbye and grabbed Mars' hand. “Bless you, Mars; good luck.”

Mars nodded and said “Now!” He, Bill and Charlie disappeared with another loud *CRACK*.

Then the waiting commenced.

Ron and Ginny returned five minutes later with a packed trunk for Percy. Harry filled them in on what had happened in their absence and then he started pacing nervously. Ginny hugged her mother and sat on her lap, both of them white as sheets. Hermione was also pacing the room, twisting her hands together with tears welling up in

her eyes, until Ron called her over next to him on the couch. Hermione sat down and put her arms around him and buried her head as deep in his chest as she could manage. Ron stared back and forth from where his brothers and Mars had disappeared to where Harry was pacing.

Harry knew it would be at least twelve minutes before Percy and his escort arrived at the ambush spot, but he was certain Mars and the Weasleys could appear at any moment. For some reason he was still confident, but the tension was beginning to press upon him. Five minutes passed, and then ten. After fifteen minutes Ron looked at him worriedly, but Harry gave him a confident nod. He knew they could not fail. Mrs. Weasley looked around the room nervously, but Ginny and Hermione had not lifted their heads. No one made a sound.

Suddenly a loud *CRACK* was heard and Bill, Charlie and Percy Weasley appeared. Bill and Charlie looked fine, but Percy looked woozy and sullen. Relief filled Harry's veins and he shouted a triumphant "Yes!" simultaneously with Ron, who jumped off the couch and ran towards his brothers, with Hermione right behind him. The Weasleys and Hermione embraced the three brothers wildly. Harry reached the happy group last and asked Bill, shouting above the celebrations, "Where's Mars?"

"He's erasing the guards' real memories and implanting ones to make them think Percy overpowered them single-handedly," answered Bill, locked in a very tight hug from Ginny.

"You can do that with a Memory Charm?" asked Hermione, who was now hugging Harry and jumping up and down.

"Mars can," answered Charlie, slinging an arm around Ron's shoulder.

"Oh Percy, we were so worried. We missed you very much," said Mrs. Weasley, tears of happiness rolling down her glowing face as she embraced him.

"I'm not sure if I can apologize enough," Percy said slowly. He seemed to be

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having difficulty speaking. “I am ashamed of my actions. I should never have doubted you or Father, or Dumbledore. Please, please forgive me. I don't know what came over me. I thought for sure I was going to die in that chamber all alone and never see my family again,” said Percy as tears welled up in his eyes. He hugged his mother tightly.

Harry had never heard Percy speak this way before. All of his arrogance was gone and his voice held the sound of true regret. There was no doubt that Percy was sincerely sorry for his actions. Harry had no problem forgiving him. Apparently, neither did the Weasleys, as even Ron hugged his brother and welcomed him home. Charlie grabbed the trunk that Ron and Ginny had packed and dragged it over to Percy's side.

“Oh, Percy, dear, we're just so glad to have you—” Mrs Weasley was saying when she was interrupted by a loud *CRACK.* Mars apparated into the middle of the living room.

“Mars!” everyone shouted, and they rushed over to him. Mrs. Weasley was first to reach him. She grabbed his hand and kissed it over and over.

“Oh Mars, we're so grateful to you for rescuing Percy. Will you ever forgive me for being so horrible to you?” asked Mrs. Weasley.

“Of course, Molly, I never blamed you,” answered Mars, putting his arms around the much shorter. Mrs Weasley. “However, we have very little time. Percy, do you need anything else from here before I deliver you to sanctuary?”

“There are a few things I want to collect. I'll be back straight away,” answered Percy and he staggered towards the stairs.

“I knew you could do it, Mars!” said Harry.

“Brilliant, Mars!” shrieked Hermione.

“Things certainly went our way; let's hope our luck continues. All the intelligence that the contact gave us was perfect, and the Weasley boys were straight shooters with their wands, for once,” said Mars, smiling as he gave Charlie a playful shove.

“Molly, I can't tell you immediately where I'm taking Percy, but once I'm sure it's safe I'll show you how to visit him.” Mars turned from Mrs. Weasley and faced the others. “Now, this next bit is *very* important. I expect this very night you will be visited by Department of Magical Law Enforcement wizards and members of the Committee Against Dark Sorcerers. And they may bring Veritaserum with them.”

“Oh no!” squeaked Hermione.

“There is some protection from that potion, Hermione. Here are a few vials of a drought that will counteract Veritaserum's effects for about 24 hours. If they want you to prove your innocence, go ahead and agree to take the Veritaserum within that time period. It should clear you of any involvement. Just remember, you should have no idea that Percy was to be executed until you see it in the Daily Prophet,” warned Mars.

“I didn't think using Veritaserum like that was legal,” objected Harry.

“It isn't normally, Harry, but Ministry officials are terrified of having CADS accuse them of being spies for Riddle. They don't dare object to anything CADS wants to do in the name of fighting Voldemort. Even Fudge is terrified of Lennon now. I'm sure he gave up Umbridge and Percy to placate Jo Anne Lennon so she'd leave his name off of her infernal list,” said Mars, looking disgusted.

Percy lurched back into the room and his mother hugged him again. He looked to Mars for direction.

“Percy, you see that truck?” asked Mars as he pointed out the window into the Weasley's front yard. Percy nodded. “Apparate into the front seat, and don't worry about being seen through the windows. They're bewitched to make the vehicle look empty. We'll bring your baggage.”

Percy disentangled himself from his mother and disappeared. Mrs. Weasley moved over to Mars and hugged him.

“Oh, how can we thank you, Mars?” she asked.

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“Being welcome in this house again is the greatest reward I could ever ask for, Molly.” Mars beamed down at her. “Your ordeal is not yet over, however. Make sure you're prepared for the inquiry to come.”

Mars grabbed the trunk and Bill picked up the bags Percy had packed, and they went outside to load the truck. Mars and Bill spoke briefly and then Mars and Percy left in the SUV.

Mrs. Weasley's face no longer looked downtrodden, but determined. When Bill came back inside, she gathered everyone together to prepare for the unpleasant visits to come. They all agreed that Mrs. Weasley would appear be worried sick about Percy, while everyone else would seem to be of the opinion that since Percy had disowned them, he was no longer a Weasley. The wait was tense, but everyone's spirits were still high from Percy's dramatic rescue.

Two hours later, the sounds of wizards apparating outside could be heard and there was a knock on the front door. “Places, everyone,” murmured Mrs. Weasley as she sat on the couch, looking sad. Everyone busied themselves with something while Bill checked the bewitched mirror and then answered the door.

One auror stood on either side of the door, and a broad, square-jawed witch with short gray hair, wearing a monocle, stood behind them. Harry knew all three. The aurors were Dawlish and Tonks, while the witch behind them was the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones. Harry had heard that Mrs Bones was a firm but fair woman, and she had treated him well at his hearing last summer. With her and Tonks in the delegation, Harry had high hopes that everything would turn out all right.

Bones introduced herself and the aurors, and Bill politely invited them in. Molly greeted Amelia as an old acquaintance. Bones sat down and started asking questions about Percy. Harry thought things were going really well. Bones seemed satisfied with the answers she was receiving, and the acting was, in Harry's opinion, superb. Mrs.

Weasley looked generally aghast when told that Percy had escaped—(“Oh why did he do that? He surely would have been cleared by the tribunal,”)—but Harry noticed that Bones failed to mention that Percy had received a death sentence. The Weasley children unanimously declared Percy no brother of theirs, and Mrs. Weasley sighed sadly as each child denounced Percy. Harry had to work hard not to smile.

Harry and Hermione prepared tea for everyone. The aurors declined, though Tonks winked at Harry when she knew Dawlish wasn't looking, but Amelia Bones accepted a cup. Except for taking the teacup from Hermione, Bones ignored her and Harry completely, which suited him just fine. It seemed that Bones' questioning of the Weasleys was about over, because the two women were now talking about their husbands instead of Percy, and they seemed to be getting on just fine. Everyone seemed to relax except for Charlie, Bill, and Dawlish, who were eying each other carefully.

Again the sounds of apparating were heard outside. Bill and Charlie quickly jumped to their feet and ran out into the front yard. Harry was surprised. They must know that people from CADS would be coming; why act surprised, or, even worse, aggressive? Harry and Ron quickly followed Bill and Charlie outside, and then froze.

Neither of the guardian wolves were in their normal positions. They were crouched and looked ready to pounce on the new arrivals. There were five CADS members, but Harry only recognized two. One was the auror who had asked to see Mars at the Premiership, and the other was the CADS chairwoman, Jo Ann Lennon herself. Bill was directly in front of the wolves with his hands raised, making a stop gesture with one hand while the other held his wand. Charlie was between Bill and the CADS members.

“Stop! I mean it, do not move! Let Bill sort them out. These sentinel guardians are *very* dangerous. If any of you draw your wands they will kill you, that's a promise,” said Charlie loudly and clearly.

All five CADS members looked nervous, but none went for their wands. The two

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aurors in the group certainly looked like they wished for their wands, however.

“Return!” cried Bill and waved his wand at the wolves. Neither of them moved, and he repeated his command. The wolves remained motionless, their glowing red eyes staring directly at the CADS members.

“It's no use, they simply don't like you lot,” said Bill as he turned to face the group.

“What do you mean?” asked Lennon harshly.

“I mean, if any of you get closer to that door, those wolves will kill you and there's nothing to be done about it. They won't listen to me on this,” answered Bill.

“What? How dare you threaten me? Do you know who I am?” yelled Lennon.

“Yes, Ms. Lennon, I know who you are, but these wolves that Mars conjured do not. He gave me a lot of control over them, but not total control. Please, don't take out your wands,” Bill pleaded.

The other four people with her murmured, sounding concerned. Lennon's angry face changed to a look of forced friendliness.

“Oh, Mars conjured them. Well, then, we won't want to upset them. I do, however, have to speak with your family. Perhaps we can apparate back to the Ministry to conduct the interviews?” she suggested, showing her beautiful white teeth.

“Actually, Ms. Lennon, I am afraid we can't leave at this moment,” interjected Mrs. Weasley, coming out of the house along with Mrs. Bones and her escort. Ginny and Hermione followed closely behind them. “Amelia here has informed me that my son Percy has escaped capture, and I need to talk to my husband Arthur as soon as he comes home. I am very upset about these events, as I'm sure you can understand.”

Lennon frowned.

“You could conduct the interview out here,” suggested Charlie.

Lennon looked at the two wolves staring at her with those glowing red eyes and shuddered slightly. “No, no, I'll just ask Amelia for a complete report of her discussion,

that should do nicely,” she replied.

“I’ll have it for you in the morning, Jo Anne,” said Mrs. Bones, with a touch of mirth in her voice.

The CADS members disappeared with several *Cracks*.

“Well, this has been quite an interesting afternoon,” said Amelia Bones. “The end of a very rough day. Yes, I think I will go home and finish my report. Goodbye, Molly, thanks for the tea. I shall see you two at the office tomorrow,” She nodded at the aurors and then disappeared.

Dawlish nodded at Tonks and was gone.

The wolves then moved quietly back to their original places and stances; their eyes were no longer glowing.

“Fancy some tea, Tonks?” asked Charlie, putting his arm around her shoulder. She nodded, smiling, and everyone headed into the house.

After Harry and Hermione had served tea, Bill agreed to answer their questions.

“Why did the wolves want to attack those CADS people?” asked Ron.

“Obvious, isn’t it? One of them had to have been a Donnie,” answered Bill.

“Or under the Imperious Curse of one,” added Hermione.

“Good point, Hermione. The wolves would not let the CADS in, even though I ordered them to stand down.” He shook his head grimly. “Nothing less than a direct link to Voldemort would have caused them to ignore my orders. They may have been planning something worse than Veritaserum.”

“Lennon looked pretty scared once you mentioned Mars’ name, though,” said Charlie.

“No doubt, Charlie. He certainly has not turned out to be the tool she had hoped for,” replied Bill.

“Tool?” exclaimed Ginny, Ron and Harry together.

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“Oh, yes. Remember her speech at the Premiership? She mentioned Mars to try and scare Fudge into thinking that Mars supported her as the next Minister of Magic. She's been trying to recruit him into her committee all summer. I guess she thought praising him to that huge crowd along with Dumbledore would bring him to her side,” answered Bill.

“Is that why the nasty looking auror with the crew cut was so disappointed when you told him Mars couldn't make it?” asked Harry.

Bill and Charlie nodded in agreement. Harry was about to ask about the red-headed wizard who had handed Lennon something at the match, but he remembered his oath and that two members of the Order were in the room, and stopped himself.

“How did you know that the wolves would want to attack Lennon's party?” asked Hermione.

“We didn't *know* they would, but Mars warned me that it might happen, just before he drove off with Percy,” answered Bill.

Harry really wanted to ask Bill more questions, but he bit his tongue instead. He had been adamant that he was to be included in the fight against Voldemort and he didn't intend to make Bill or Charlie sorry they had trusted him.

Chapter Nine – Going to the Chapel



It was the week after Percy's dramatic escape, and the morning post had arrived after breakfast as normal, but today a large golden eagle was at the window as well as the usual Daily Prophet owl. Harry immediately knew that Mars must have sent something, and he hurried to open the window. He paid the owl for the newspaper, then took the letter from the eagle. The eagle looked at Harry carefully and then at the envelope in his hand. He glanced at it and noticed that menacing markings covered the front side. The eagle then took off from the window sill and flew into the sky. Harry could have sworn that she had waited for him to notice the marks.

The drawings looked like the runes that Harry had seen Hermione and Luna studying, but he had no idea what they meant. The girls entered the kitchen, chatting, and Harry called Hermione over to look at the envelope.

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“What do you make of them?” he asked Hermione.

“Well, they're not any runes that I've studied at Hogwarts. In fact, I don't think they're runes at all,” stated Hermione.

Ginny nodded in agreement.

“The letter's addressed to Mrs. Weasley, so I'm guessing that if anyone else tried to open it, they'd be very sorry indeed,” warned Hermione.

Harry quickly placed the letter carefully on the table. He had no desire to discover what kind of retribution would strike someone foolish enough to intercept a letter from Mars.

Mrs. Weasley and Ron now entered the kitchen and Harry drew Mrs. Weasley's attention to the letter from Mars. Mrs. Weasley didn't seem fazed by the malicious lettering, because she opened it straight away. It took her only a few seconds to read it, after which she looked happier than Harry had seen her since Ginny had been named a prefect.

“What did he say, Mum?” asked Ginny brightly.

“Well, there's good news, and a bit of bad news. I was hoping Mars had the time to go with us to Diagon Alley so Harry could come. I know that the last two years you haven't been able to make it, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said, looking at Harry. “Ron's told me that you always enjoy yourself there. But it seems Mars is just too busy at the moment. He has a few things up to wrap up before he—well, he's just too busy. Without Mars, I don't think it's safe for you to come along, Harry.”

Harry nodded solemnly. He was a bit disappointed not to be going to Diagon Alley, but he was more intrigued at what was keeping Mars so busy.

“What was the good news, Mum?” asked Ron.

“Oh, er—he just answered a few questions for, er, your father, yes, for your father,” stammered Mrs. Weasley.

“What questions?” asked Ginny and Ron together.

“Never you mind! Hermione, Harry, I need you two dears to get a list ready of the school supplies you'll need for next term. Ginny and I will go to Diagon Alley this afternoon,” said Mrs. Weasley.

“How come only Ginny gets to go?” complained Ron.

“Because I don't want to leave poor Harry all alone, and Ginny needs to pick out her new dress robes for making prefect. Charlie will drive us in Mars' truck,” answered Mrs. Weasley, and then she left the kitchen.

“She sure seems friendlier with Mars since he helped Percy out,” commented Hermione.

“I don't think she ever actually disliked him,” said Harry. He was about to say more when he remembered overhearing Mrs. Weasley sobbing while Fleur comforted her, and he couldn't bring himself to continue reliving that memory.

Over the next few days thoughts of the upcoming school term were pushed into the background by the hurry to get ready for Bill and Fleur's wedding. While the wedding had been a topic of discussion among the Weasleys all summer, now suddenly the wedding was only two weeks away and it dominated all conversations. Fleur's family had arrived in Britain, and both families were busy with preparations. Harry and Hermione felt a bit out of sorts with all the family events going on.

While the Weasleys scurried about with last-minute errands and preparations, Hermione took advantage of a quiet moment to ask Harry how his Occlumency lessons were going. Mars had visited Harry twice since Percy's rescue. The Occlumency lessons, like Mars had promised, were much less traumatic without Snape as the teacher. Mars carefully instructed Harry on how to recognize attacks, how to close his mind to them, and how to clear his mind before going to sleep. Unlike Snape, Mars didn't use his wand at all for Legilimens—he simply stared at Harry; but the results were much more intense.

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Mars seemed to speed through Harry's memories, like a soaring hawk gazing for the movement of any prey. However, while Snape had invariably picked embarrassing or frightening moments in Harry's life, Mars seemed to seek out Harry's victories and happier times. As a result, while Harry felt quite drained at the end of his lessons he still felt good, much like after a strenuous session of teaching his Dark Arts Defense Club last year. It was a good tired, so to speak. This was very different from the drained, depressed feeling he had had after every Occlumency lesson with Snape.

During his first lesson, Harry felt his attempts at defense had been hopeless, but in his second lesson he had managed to deflect the probe. Just as when he had turned the tables on Snape, Harry found himself privy to some of Mars' memories. He saw a beautiful, raven-haired woman with light blue eyes like Mars. She was smiling warmly and greeting him as he came in the door. As she approached him with welcoming arms, Harry heard a voice and turned. Mars was standing there, in his own memory, smiling at him.

“My mind is far too dangerous a place for you to be wandering around in, Harry.”

Harry had snapped out of the memory. Mars had congratulated him and said that Harry would only need a few more lessons, and that he had to leave.

“That's where I stand now,” said Harry as he finished recounting his story. “We'll have another lesson after the wedding, before school starts.”

“He actually appeared in his own memory telling you to leave?” asked Hermione.

“Yeah, very different from when Snape stopped me.”

“Who was the woman? Did he say?”

“Mars said it was his mum. I swear, Hermione, I could feel love and caring just pouring out of her. Like she exuded goodness.”

“He must really love his mum to have such a powerful memory of her.”

Harry nodded.

The last of the wedding plans were not finalized until the day before the ceremony. Hermione, Ginny, Fleur's little sister Gabrielle, and the maid of honor were all staying with Fleur at the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade that night. Fleur and the girls would walk to Hogwarts early the next morning, before the Groom arrived, and there the bride would get ready. Charlie, the best man, would then drive Bill to Hogwarts in the Hummer right before the ceremony. The truck was Mars' wedding present, and it was already proving useful.

When Hermione and Ginny had left for Hogsmeade, Harry and Ron felt out of place at the Burrow. Everyone was running around and they only seemed to be able to get in everyone's way. Mrs. Weasley seemed both happy and nervous at the same time. Bill was a bit tetchy, and Charlie's teasing was not helping. All in all, Harry was quite glad when bedtime finally arrived and he and Ron could escape the commotion and get some rest.

The next morning, Mrs. Weasley awoke Ron and Harry early. They dressed quickly and then walked warily down the stairs. In the kitchen they found Mr. And Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Charlie, and the twins, eating breakfast with none other than Mars. Ron and Harry awoke completely when they saw Mars, and greeted him enthusiastically as they sat down and started to eat.

"You two dears hurry with your breakfast now. Mars wants to be at Hogwarts well before the girls arrive with Fleur," said Mrs. Weasley as she sat down next to her husband.

"We're going with you today, Mars?" asked Harry hopefully.

"How come you want to beat Fleur there?" asked Ron.

"Yes, you are, Harry," answered Mars. "You two can't apparate yet, and the Hummer is spoken for today." He then turned his gaze to Ron. "The Delacours are a very superstitious family, Ron. Not only do they want to make sure the Groom doesn't see his

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Bride before she walks down the isle, they don't want any males close to him to see her either. So we have to get there, finish setting everything up, and then get inside before the girls arrive.”

“Just what are you planning, Mars?” asked Mrs. Weasley.

“I told you, Molly, it's a surprise,” Mars twinkled. “Fleur will love it. Hurry up, you two.”

Harry and Ron bolted their food and ran upstairs to get their dress clothes and robes together. They rushed downstairs again to meet Mars in the living room.

“Okay, we'll see the rest of you Weasleys at the wedding,” said Mars, and then he pointed his wand at the rug and said “Elicio!” A large elegant vase with many songbirds painted on it appeared. He jabbed his wand at the vase and said “Portus,” and it glowed blue and shook a bit before settling peacefully.

“Mars, an unauthorized Portkey? They'll be able to track that back to the Burrow, you know,” stuttered Mr. Weasley nervously.

“Relax, Arthur. After my wolves knocked high-and-mighty Jo Anne Lennon off her pedestal last week, Fudge has been real keen on me. I have permission to make any Portkey I need to. Besides, do you really think they could track me if I didn't want them to?” asked Mars toothily.

Charlie, the twins and Bill all smiled at the bravado, but Mr. and Mrs. Weasley still looked bothered.

“Now you lot be careful, we'll see you this afternoon,” said Mrs. Weasley as she kissed all three on the cheek.

“On the count of three, we all grab the vase and hold on tight. One, two, three!” said Mars.

Mars, Ron and Harry all reached out to the vase and grabbed it simultaneously. Harry felt the familiar sensation, like a hook jerking him by the navel. He managed to

keep his eyes open the entire time as they flew into a vast array of colors and sounds. His brain was close to sensory overload with all that was going on around him. Just when he was sure that he couldn't handle any more sensations, his feet hit the ground hard. He and Ron both stumbled a bit, but kept their feet. Mars, however, landed sure-footedly. He look at Harry and Ron and smiled.

“Good job keeping your feet, boys.”

“We're at Hogwarts? Nice Portkey, Mars,” said Ron, impressed.

Harry looked around and noticed that they were on the lawn in front of the Hogwarts castle. He could see the giant squid swimming lazily across the lake towards the mountains. Harry felt good to be at Hogwarts, even if only for a day.

“C'mon, the ceremony's going to be over here. Professor Dumbledore will be meeting us here any minute to help with the setup,” said Mars, heading towards the center of the lawn with his long strides. Ron and Harry had to jog to keep up.

“How come they're getting married on a Wednesday, anyway? People have been complaining about that all month,” asked Ron when they stopped.

“According to tradition, Wednesday is supposed to be the best day to get married, Ron, though most people have it on Saturday because it's more convenient. But Saturday is actually the most unlucky day to be married, so a superstitious family like Fleur's would insist on a Wednesday. Today, whatever the Bride says, goes, Bud. Get used to that idea, boys; it'll be your turn sooner than you think,” Mars commented as he turned and looked at the castle's gates.

Both Ron and Harry wrinkled their noses.

“Ah, here he comes now.” Mars pointed. Dumbledore was striding towards them from the castle, smiling all the way.

Dumbledore and Mars exchanged pleasantries and quickly got down to work. Mars created a magnificent red carpet that ran from the castle's entrance to the center of

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the lawn where they stood. Dumbledore created about eighty chairs in rows on either side of the carpet. Mars then conjured a beautiful silk canopy at the end of the carpet that was large enough to cover at least six people. Finally, Dumbledore summoned a pedestal and a few tables with candles and orchid-filled vases .

“Well, I think that about does it,” said Dumbledore pleasantly.

“Just one more thing, Professor,” replied Mars. “Wait here.” He walked about twenty feet away and started moving rhythmically. His arms waved rapidly and they could hear him chanting.

“Is he dancing?” asked Ron with a puzzled look.

“Yes, Mr. Weasley. Chanting and dancing are a big part of Native American magic. I think I know what he is up to now,” said Dumbledore, gazing intently at Mars.

The Headmaster didn't let Ron and Harry in on his suspicions; instead, he remained silent as Mars continued to chant for another minute or so. When Mars finally stopped dancing, he spread his arms wide and looked at the sky.

His audience followed his gaze upward and both Harry and Ron gaped as they saw the largest, brightest rainbow they had ever witnessed form before their eyes. It started somewhere over the mountains, crested over the road to Hogsmeade and came to rest, seemingly, miles past the forbidden forest. Dumbledore clapped politely and Harry and Ron quickly joined in.

“Bravo, Mars. That is simply beautiful,” said Dumbledore, beaming proudly at his former pupil.

“Thank you, Headmaster. Nothing is luckier than a bride seeing a rainbow on her way to the wedding. Mum's the word on me helping that rainbow come about, eh, boys?” Mars winked.

“I didn't see anything, did you, Ron?” Harry grinned.

They all laughed.

“Well, we need to get out of here before the bridal party arrives. We have a few hours before the wedding; is there anything else that needs to be done inside?” asked Mars.

“The house elves have the reception completely ready so you three can enjoy yourselves. I have a few letters to write so if you lot will excuse me I will be off,” said Dumbledore.

All three of them bid Dumbledore goodbye and he ambled back towards the castle.

“Well, I think I have the perfect task to occupy us until the ceremony. Professor Dumbledore told me that Magorian was furious with Hagrid and him at the end of last year. We should go smooth things over with Magorian and his people,” suggested Mars.

“Magorian? The last time I saw him, he wanted to kill me, Mars!” Harry protested. Seeing Ron's confused look, Harry added, “He's the leader of the centaurs; well, I think he's the leader, anyway.”

Ron nodded in comprehension.

“Relax, Harry. I know Magorian very well. No matter what Hagrid or Professor Dumbledore did to upset them, he'll greet me as a friend. I'm one of the few wizards who studies the stars as much as they do. I do remember Hagrid used to call them something derogatory; hmm—what was it again?” asked Mars with his hand on his chin.

“The last time I was in the forest with him, I remember Hagrid calling them a bunch of mules,” said Harry nervously.

“He did? Well, that's not a bright way to get on their good side, is it? No, no, it wasn't a racist name like that, that I remember. Oh yes, it was 'ruddy stargazers'.”

Harry nodded. He remembered in his first year Hagrid referring to the centaurs that way after they answered his questions so obtusely.

“Well, I'm a ruddy stargazer myself!” said Mars, grinning. “Don't worry, Harry. We'll be fine around them. Let's get going.” Mars set off in his quick long strides, straight

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for the forbidden forest. Ron and Harry trotted after him.

About twenty minutes into the forest, the group was confronted by three armed centaurs, but as Mars had predicted, the two older ones recognized him and seemed happy to see him. The centaurs quickly consented to bring them to Magorian. Some time later, they were face to face with the centaur leader, who was in the middle of talking to another centaur named Bane. Harry sighed; he and Bane had never gotten along.

Magorian seemed happy to see Mars, but Bane scowled at Harry and didn't smile when Mars greeted him.

“Mars, I am pleased to see you after so long an absence. We asked Hagrid many times about your welfare, but he would only say that you had gone abroad,” said Magorian.

“He wasn't giving you vague answers on purpose, my old friend. Hagrid has not seen nor heard from me in eleven years. I had indeed gone abroad, back to my birthland in fact, but it is here that I feel most at home.”

“Of course you do, Mars. You alone among wizardkind understand the heavens as we do; you do not belong in their cruel world, but with us. Gather your mate and foals and return here. You will not miss the deceitful wizards you leave behind.” Magorian looked scornfully at Harry and Ron, which did nothing to reduce Harry's anxiety about being in the forest. The centaurs might like Mars, but they seemed to still hold a grudge against Ron and him.

Mars smiled at the centaur and replied, “One day I will take you up on that offer. For now I have no mate, no foals, and no time to properly study the stars and their meanings.” Magorian and the two friendly centaurs looked surprised and saddened, but Mars continued. “While abroad, I constantly waged war, Magorian, and I am afraid that I have returned to Britain to do the same.”

Magorian's face hardened. “Then we are reading the signs correctly? The peace

between the wizards' wars has passed and now they seek to slaughter each other again?"

Mars nodded. "Two months ago it began. Peripheral conflicts only, so far, but an enormous battle is coming, Magorian. I fear your people will be right in the path of violence. I am very sorry."

"You have seen this? You are sure?" asked the centaur anxiously.

"Yes, I have seen it. I may be wrong, I hope I am, but Magorian – it was quite clear. We cannot ignore it," said Mars, shaking his head.

Magorian looked fiercely for a few second in the direction Harry thought Hogwarts lay. His angry gaze returned to Mars.

"It is Dumbledore who brings this upon us, isn't it?"

Harry scowled. How could they blame Voldemort on Dumbledore?

"Yes, Magorian," said Mars grimly.

Ron and Harry gasped in horror.

"But Mars, how can you –,," Harry interrupted, but Mars raised his hand.

"Silence, Harry!" said Mars sternly. His friendly expression was now gone. He looked deadly serious as he spoke to Magorian.

"Dumbledore is Voldemort's enemy, Magorian. Voldemort envies his power, his esteem, his knowledge, and his secrets. That is why Voldemort will come, and your people are in his path. Dumbledore has never meant you any harm. If not for Dumbledore, your people would have been forced off your land long ago."

This pronouncement seemed to offend Magorian and infuriate Bane.

"I would have never believed our old friend Mars would sound like a ministry official. Claiming the centaurs live only because of the great mercy of the wizards. What has happened to you?" said Magorian with deep loathing.

"When did I utter such nonsense? Why would you twist the words of an old friend like that? Magorian, surely you remember who defeated Grindelwald?"

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All the centaurs flinched horribly.

“Name him not!” commanded Magorian.

“You haven't forgotten him then?”

“Forgotten him? Madness has surely afflicted you, Mars. He and his followers murdered thousands of centaurs. Where was your wonderful ministry then? They were cowering as his people butchered us!”

“The ministry cowered, yes, but Dumbledore defeated him. I do not expect you to have any loyalty or gratitude towards the Ministry or wizards in general, Magorian, but Dumbledore has treated you respectfully and fairly, and I have *always* been your friend. Do you really think you would be better off with Voldemort's bunch running things?”

“What about that witch Umbridge? She claimed to be the Headmistress of the school, insulted us and attacked Magorian! What about her, eh, wizard?” demanded Bane. He looked angry, but kept his distance from Mars.

“She has been deposed and sent off to Azkaban.”

“Why did Dumbledore rescue her then? If the two of you hated her as much as you say, why not leave her to us?” asked Magorian, who seemed a bit calmer now.

“If he didn't rescue her, the Ministry would have sent their own wizards to take her from you forcefully. You can imagine how bad that would have been. We need to work together, your people, myself, Dumbledore and Hagrid. The only other choice is defeat.”

Magorian thought deeply for a moment and then replied, “I will speak with the others, Mars. I trust you, and Dumbledore has never lied to us. But we still have an issue with Hagrid and him about Firenze.”

All of the centaurs looked angry at the mention of Firenze's name.

“I'll be back with Dumbledore and Hagrid. I am sure we can clear that obstacle.”

Mars shook hands with Magorian and the two friendly centaurs and then he, Harry and Ron started walking back to the castle. After a few minutes Harry felt brave enough

to speak up.

“I can't believe they're still so mad at Firenze; it's not like he taught us anything at all last year.”

“Very true,” Ron nodded.

“Centaurs are really touchy about anyone learning their secrets. I am guessing Professor Dumbledore was banking on his defeat of Grindelwald to give him enough clout to be able to hire Firenze without too much fuss from the others,” said Mars.

“Didn't turn out that way, did it?” commented Ron.

“Not yet. Hopefully, Magorian will listen to me; we can't have him trying to kill Hagrid each time he goes into the forest,” replied Mars.

“Speaking of Hagrid, can we go see him now? I want to thank him for the watch he got me,” asked Harry.

“I am afraid he's still on a mission for the Order, Harry,” answered Mars.

“Oh,” said Harry, disappointed. “I hope he's back in time before school starts.”

“Me too. I hated not seeing him when we got off the train last year,” added Ron.

“Yeah, that was depressing,” said Harry.

The rest of the morning passed pleasantly, with Harry and Ron asking Mars questions about America and about the things he and the older Weasley boys had done at Hogwarts. Mars had many excellent stories to tell, and before Harry knew it, he and Ron had to rush inside to change for the wedding.

Many people from the Ministry and Gringotts Bank were in attendance – even a few goblins. Harry figured that Fleur must have come from a large family with lots of friends, because her side of the aisle was just as full as Bill's. French could be heard as often as English in the guests' chatter as they awaited the arrival of the bride. Charlie, Bill and some wizard Harry had never seen before were standing around the silk canopy, shifting nervously as they peered towards the Castle gates.

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Music then filled the air of the lawn, though no instruments were visible. The audience all stood and turned towards the gates. A young blond girl exited the gates and walked along the carpet. She scattered flower petals from a basket as she approached the canopy. As she neared, Harry recognized her as Fleur's little sister, Gabrielle, whom he had rescued during the second task of the Triwizard Tournament two years ago, and she smiled at him as she passed. After Gabrielle reached the canopy, she quickly ran over to her mother in the front row. Fleur's mother looked a great deal like Fleur, but Harry noticed that at this moment she didn't look haughty at all, but merely nervous.

Harry heard a murmur from the crowd, and he and Ron looked back towards the castle to see Fleur approaching in a magnificent white dress, escorted by her father. As Fleur walked up the aisle, Harry could see orange blossoms in her hair and a stunning bouquet of orchids. Harry had to admit that she looked radiant. He was surprised to hear many of the women and girls sniffing and to see them wiping tears from their eyes.

“Why in the world are they crying now?” whispered Harry to Ron. This earned him a swift kick from Ginny, whom he now noticed was shedding a few tears herself. Hermione gave him one of the nastier looks that she normally reserved for Ron.

Harry found the ceremony itself quite tedious. Ron looked as bored as he, but Hermione and Ginny seemed enamored with the whole ordeal, staying misty-eyed throughout the long process of oaths and candle lightings. Neither he nor Ron dared to make any noises of boredom, with the two girls on each side of them happily sighing every minute or so. Harry was relieved when Bill and Fleur were finally pronounced husband and wife and kissed. The crowd cheered raucously as the newlyweds walked down the aisle and back towards the castle gates. None cheered louder than Harry and Ron; they were so glad to finally be allowed to move and make some kind of noise!

The guests slowly followed the happy couple along the carpet to the Great Hall for the reception.

“That was a wonderful ceremony, wasn't it?” asked Hermione glowingly.

“Oh yes, it was. Fleur looked fantastic! What a dress,” answered Ginny enthusiastically.

“Bill looked great too,” added Hermione.

The only thing Harry could think of was the food awaiting them at the reception so he wisely chose to smile silently until they reached the Great Hall. There was a large table at the front which at the moment seated four people: Bill, Fleur, Charlie, and the maid of honor. Harry noticed that Bill and Fleur had a single glass between them on the table. It was a large, beautiful cup with two handles and many sparkling gems in intricate patterns.

Ginny noticed Harry's curious stare at the cup and told him, “That's a Coupe De Marriage, Harry. It's been in the Delacour family for over three hundred years. Fleur talked a lot about it yesterday.”

There were smaller round tables on each side of the Great Hall, with a large open space between them. Cheesy music permeated the Hall along with the smell of butterbeer and firewhiskey. Ginny lead them to a table up front, near the wedding party.

Hermione and Harry were seated with Ron, Ginny, and the twins. The menus in front of them looked very similar to the ones from the Yule Ball two years ago. Harry picked his up, decided what he wanted, and said, “Roast Beef and Potatoes.” His plate filled with delicious looking food, and Harry dug in. Everyone else was doing the same, and the feast was on.

After most of the guests had finished their meal, the bride and groom ventured across the hall to cut themselves pieces of the wedding cake. It was an enormous, layered rum-soaked fruit cake with hard white icing. Harry couldn't wait to try it. After the couple had cut their pieces and returned to their seats, everyone else queued up for pieces of the cake and took it back to enjoy at their tables; everyone, that is, except for Mars and Tonks, who walked over to the table where Harry was sitting with his own piece.

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“Wotcher, Harry?” asked Tonks.

Harry's mouth was quite full so he just smiled back at her.

“Aren't you having any of the wedding cake, Mars?” asked Hermione.

“I had a little, but just for luck. I can't stand the stuff,” said Mars quietly.

“Charlie said you had terrible taste in food,” blurted out Ron with a laugh.

“He did?” said Mars, looking at Charlie, who was close enough to hear the conversation and was chuckling. “Like he would he know anything about taste? If he eats anything spicier than white bread, he cries like a four-year-old.” Mars and Charlie made faces at each other while the others giggled.

A short while later Charlie announced that the bride and her father would lead the first dance, followed by the groom and his mother. Others could join in shortly thereafter. Fleur glided to the area between the tables and clasped her father's hands with her own.

“Dancing?” said Harry, startled. “No one told me anything about dancing.”

“Don't be silly, Harry. People usually dance at weddings,” said Hermione.

“Well I've never been to one before. You lot should have warned me,” replied Harry nervously.

“What do you mean, warned you?” asked Ginny suspiciously.

“So I could have planned to sneak out when they were cutting the cake or something,” answered Harry.

“You know, I think we still can skive off. Everyone is staring at the bride,” said an equally antsy Ron.

Harry nodded and started looking around the room.

“Ronald Weasley, you are not sneaking out of your own brother's wedding,” said Ginny sternly.

“Why not, Ginny? Bill won't even notice. C'mon, Harry, I think this would be the easiest way,” said Ron, pointing left.

“I mean it, Ron! Mum will want you both to dance with her, so will Fleur. You two are *not* going to ruin this day for them,” snarled Ginny.

Harry and Ron both looked terrified.

“Ginny's right, you know. If you two try to skive off we'll make enough fuss that you get caught, so you might as well not bother,” Hermione huffed.

Harry and Ron sat back in their seats and resigned themselves to suffering the indignity of the dance floor. Harry sighed.

Both Hermione and Ginny now had their arms crossed and were looking at the many dancers around Bill and Fleur. Every now and then one or the other of them shot a glare at Ron or Harry, to which Ron responded with a muttered, “What?” This seemed to merely annoy them further and they would turn back to the dance floor with noisy sighs.

Harry knew his only way out of the doghouse was to ask one of them to dance, but he couldn't screw up the courage to do it. The last thing he wanted to do was look the prat by trying to dance in front of all these graceful French wizards, Ministry officials, or Mars and Dumbledore. He saw no way to escape unscathed.

Mr. Weasley came over to their table and asked Ginny to dance. After she had left, Hermione gave Ron the nastiest look yet before turning back to the dancers.

Harry nudged his best friend and said, “Go on, mate. Otherwise it's nothing but icy stares for a month.”

Ron nodded at him and started to stand, but then they heard Mars' voice.

“Why in the name of Merlin is such a lovely young girl by herself when a song like this is playing?” Mars was bending down and holding out his hand to Hermione.

Hermione smiled back at him, stood and said, “Oh there are reasons...none of them good, though.” She then took his hand, turned up her nose at Harry and Ron, and walked onto the dance floor with Mars.

Ron looked quite miserable and Harry felt sorry for him. However, with both the

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girls gone, at least Harry and Ron could talk without being sneered at. After they had chatted for a few minutes Harry was feeling better, but he spotted Fleur walking towards Ron with a twinkle in her eye.

“Venez avec moi petit frère,” she said, reaching her beautiful hand towards Ron.

Harry knew Ron could not get away with denying the bride's request. Ron managed a smile at Fleur. She led him off, much as Mars had led Hermione. Harry had just leaned back and started to relax when Tonks shouted at him.

“Oi! Harry! Whatcha you doing over there by yourself?”

Harry's face flushed immediately.

“C'mon, give us a spin,” added Tonks. She then waved her hand, motioning him to come over. Harry slowly walked towards her. As soon as he was within arm's length, Tonks seized him with surprising strength and spun him around. The two were then whirling around the floor and sometimes into other couples.

He was prepared to feel very awkward while trying to dance, but Tonks was so clumsy and unashamed of it that Harry actually felt light on his feet. He began to smile, and noticed Ron too was enjoying himself.

“Switch!” shouted Mars.

Tonks and Harry looked confused. Then they saw that Mars had let go of Hermione and was now cutting in on Charlie to dance with Mrs. Weasley. Everyone seemed to get the idea; Harry's next partner was Fleur, and after another switch, he was with Ginny, and Hermione was dancing with Ron.

Harry wasn't sure if he actually liked dancing or not, but at least Ginny was smiling at him instead of scowling as they slowly swayed to the music. Fleur and Mars then spun by them and he heard Fleur speaking in French.

“Ta plan a fonctionné très bien, Mars,” she said, smiling at Harry and Ginny as they passed.

“Vous deux avez fait un grand travail,” answered Mars.

Harry spoke no French, but he was positive that he and Ron had been set up by Fleur, Tonks and Mars. For some reason it wasn't bothering him at all.

About twenty-five minutes later Harry noticed Ginny staring intently at the doors to the Entrance Hall. He asked her what she was looking at.

“Isn't that Sturgis Podmore talking with Mars and that weird wizard who was chatting with Bill and Charlie before the ceremony?” she asked.

Harry looked at the doors as they spun around again and nodded at her. Podmore looked excited, and Mars and the other wizard looked grave.

Ginny seemed to be edging Harry to his right, where Ron was still dancing with Hermione. The two of them looked so happy that he hated to distract them, but it seemed Ginny was going to take the choice out of his hands.

“Hermione, look at the entrance,” Ginny whispered as she spun by.

Both Ron and Hermione looked over at the three wizards by the door. They all watched as Podmore hurried off from the other two and headed to Dumbledore. When Podmore reached him, the two of them separated themselves from the crowd and Podmore looked very concerned as he relayed his message to the Headmaster.

“Let's go speak to Mars, right now,” said Hermione, as she immediately stopped dancing and started weaving her way to the doors.

“Why?” asked Harry as he, Ginny and Ron struggled to keep up with her.

“Because I think any second Mars is going to leave to act on whatever Podmore just told him,” replied Hermione.

When they were about ten feet away from the doors, the wizard who was waiting with Mars darted into the Entrance Hall and closed the doors behind him. Mars beamed at the four of them as they approached.

“So I guess you four noticed Podmore's briefing, eh?” he asked.

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“Yes,” said Ginny. “Hermione thinks you're about to leave; what did he tell you?”

“What would be your guess based on what you saw and what you know?” quizzed Mars. Harry was surprised that Mars was not annoyed at their nosiness. The last thing he had expected was for Mars to actively encourage their behavior.

“That he has important information on what Voldemort is doing,” said Ron.

“Too general, Ron, you can do better than that. You all saw how upset he was,” replied Mars.

“They're planning a murder or an attack?” suggested Ginny uneasily.

“Not bad, Ginny. But I'll spare y'all anymore suspense. It's a meeting; in fact, it's the biggest meeting the Donnies have had in over a decade. They'll all be masked to hide their identities, so I'm guessing that they're bringing in new members. Thanks to Sturgis, I now know the time and the place. And Hermione is right—I'm about to bolt.”

Mars looked across the Great Hall at Dumbledore. Harry saw the Headmaster look at Mars and nod solemnly. Dumbledore then went back to talking to Mad-Eye.

“The go sign. Make sure you pass the news onto Bill, Charlie, and Fleur, but tell them after the reception has wound down. I don't want them distracted during the entire party,” said Mars, looking excited. He started to turn, but Hermione grabbed his robe.

“Mars, you're not going by yourself, are you?” she asked in a terrified voice.

“Of course I am. This is a tremendous opportunity,” he answered.

“But you said it's a huge meeting. Lots of them will be in attendance,” added Harry.

“Yes, Mars, from what you said there seems to be a good chance that *he* might be there in person,” whispered Hermione, trembling.

“You mean Tom Riddle himself? Oh, Hermione, that would be very fortunate. All of them in one spot with him in the thick of it. I shouldn't get my hopes up, though. Remember: don't ruin the reception for the newlyweds.”

Mars spun quickly and dashed through the doors. The four of them followed him as

fast as they could, but when they opened the doors and looked down the Entrance Hall, there was no sight nor sound of him.

“How did he vanish like that?” asked Ron, astounded.

“He couldn't have disappeared,” added Hermione.

“Maybe he's invisible?” suggested Harry.

“Does he have a cloak?” asked Ron.

“Oh, he wouldn't need a cloak to become invisible, Ron,” came a voice from behind them. It was Charlie; he waved for them to come back into the Great Hall.

When they got back inside, Harry could see Bill and Fleur coming over to them.

“So much for not telling them until after the reception,” said Ron gloomily.

“What did Podmore tell Mars? Dumbledore isn't saying anything,” said Bill as he approached, sounding annoyed.

“There's a meeting of Death Eaters, a big one; and he told Mars when and where it was at,” answered Harry.

“We've heard hints about a meeting like that for a while now. Nothing definite though; the Donnies have been real tight with their security lately,” said Bill.

“Well that should have made Mars' day. He's been hacked off since he lost You-Know-Who in Belarus before he could try and ambush him,” added Charlie brightly.

“E shouldn't ave gone all alone like zat. We should be wizz 'im,” said Fleur with concern.

“Don't be silly, Fleur. This is your wedding day. Mars would never want to ruin it,” said Charlie.

“It *will* be ruined if he gets 'eemself killed, Charlie,” snapped Fleur.

“Killed? Don't be silly, love; Mars can take of himself,” said Bill, patting her shoulder reassuringly.

“But he said that they all might be there, even Voldemort himself,” said Harry

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earnestly.

Charlie flinched a little and then replied, “But Harry, that's precisely what he wants. Mars will probably just blow the whole building to smithereens with that lot inside.”

Charlie and Bill both smiled broadly at the thought.

“Why go it alone? Surely Moody or Dumbledore would help?” asked Hermione, starting to sound panicky.

“Relax, Hermione. He's not going to get hurt. Knowing Mars, he'll be back in time for for the Chiverie,” answered Charlie.

Charlie's comment did not relax Fleur or Hermione at all. They both looked very concerned for Mars. Fleur, in fact, seemed quite upset with Bill's and Charlie's flippant attitude toward the safety of their friend. She looked about ready to tear into both of them, when a few of Fleur's relatives called for her and Bill to come chat. This broke up the discussion and the four teenagers went back to their table.

The rest of the evening was not nearly as much fun for Harry and his friends. All of them were worried sick about Mars. Fleur shared their anxiety and visited their table several times to discuss it. Hermione and she were absolutely furious with Charlie and Bill, and they also both seemed cross at Dumbledore for letting Mars take on such a dangerous mission alone. While Harry was concerned for Mars, on the other hand, he agreed with Bill that Mars was quite capable of taking care of himself.

Mrs. Weasley came to their table at eleven or so and notified them that they would be staying at Hogwarts for the night. French wedding parties often lasted into the next afternoon, and she didn't want them going back to the Burrow by themselves.

“But Mum, we can just use the portkey that Mars created,” suggested Ron.

“Never mind that. You'll be staying in your dormitories tonight. Ginny, the house elves have set up a bed for you in Hermione's dorm,” said Mrs. Weasley and then she left quickly.

“I wonder why they want us to stay here for the night?” pondered Hermione.

“It is most likely on Mars' order,” said Fleur. “’E took Lilandria wizz ’im so ’e will want Dumblydore to be near ’Arry.”

“Why would that make him want me to be near Dumbledore?” asked Harry.

“If she is wizz ’eem, zen she cannot watch over you, mon ami.”

“You mean Lily has been watching me?” asked Harry hotly.

“’Arry, do not be mad. ’E was très upset zat you ’ad been attacked so many times. Mars no longer trusts anyone but ’eemself et Dumblydore to protect you,” answered Fleur, putting her hand on his shoulder.

Harry swallowed his pride and accepted her explanation. He, Ginny, Hermione and Ron soon after went to bed in the Gryffindor dormitories. The next morning, they were awakened by Mrs. Weasley, who ordered them off to the portkey that Mars had created. The four teenagers bombarded her with questions about Mars' whereabouts, but she would only confirm that he had not returned for the Chiverie late last night. She looked a little haggard and crossly shook off their other questions. The lack of news did not comfort them at all, and they trekked to the portkey for the Burrow with trepidation in their hearts.

The teenagers did not see any sign of Mars in the following days, but there Hermione spotted an article in the Daily Prophet that may have been a clue. On the night of the wedding, a large muggle warehouse in Leeds, that had been abandoned for years, inexplicably exploded. The muggle officials were blaming the IRA, but Ministry officials were sure the explosion was magically induced. They and the CADS people were, of course, blaming the Death Easters, but Hermione offered up a different explanation.

“What if that warehouse was hosting the meeting Mars had heard about?”

“That would make sense, Hermione. Remember, Charlie did suggest Mars might just blow up the whole building,” said Ginny.

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Harry and Hermione nodded.

“I just wish we could find out if Mars is okay,” said Harry.

“I think now we can assume that he is, Harry,” said Ron who was looking out the back window into the garden.

“Why can we assume that, Ron?” asked Hermione as they walked over to join him.

“Because I can see Lily sitting on the fence in the garden,” he answered.

They all went outside and approached the bird. Lily flew over and landed on Ginny's arm. They took turns rubbing her tiny head; Harry felt much better after seeing Lilandria.

Chapter Ten – The Hogwarts Express



It had been a week since Bill and Fleur's wedding and things were just getting back to normal at the Burrow, except that now school was about to start. The morning they were to leave to catch the Hogwarts Express at King's Cross was, as in previous years, quite chaotic. Harry's personal effects were scattered throughout the house – though he swore he had no idea how that had come about. Ron was even more disorganized, and he rushed around shouting questions at people about the locations of his various possessions.

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Hermione, who had been packed and ready since the night before, did not help with her nagging about their lack of planning, instead of helping to find things. Ginny was also a little behind in getting ready, and the delay was making Mrs. Weasley a bit cross.

“It's not as if you didn't know which day we were leaving,” Mrs. Weasley said, echoing Hermione's complaints.

Eventually Ron, Ginny, Hermione, and Harry were all packed and sitting comfortably in the back seat of the Hummer, with Bill, Fleur and Mrs. Weasley up front. With Mrs. Weasley in the car, Harry knew there would be no flying on the way to King's Cross.

“This Hummer from Mars sure made a great wedding present, don't you think, Mum?” asked Bill as he patted the dash of the truck.

“I'll admit it's very handy, dear, but it's still rather extravagant,” answered Mrs. Weasley, slightly pink.

“Don't be silly, Mum. He only got this thing to impress Harry's uncle, didn't he, Harry?” asked Bill.

“Yeah, that's true. He said he really didn't like it much, he prefers Italian sports cars,” answered Harry.

“That still seems excessive—to spend so much money on something, just to impress a Muggle—doesn't it?” said Mrs. Weasley.

Harry thought she had a fair point there. Charlie had mentioned that Mars was extremely wealthy, but there must have been easier and cheaper ways to impress Uncle Vernon.

“'E likes geeving uzzers prayzants, Madame Weasley. 'E as been so lonely all zat time in ze desert wizz just bounty hunters and demons for company. Just speaking to normal weezards again geeves 'eem joy,” Fleur said sympathetically.

Mrs. Weasley and Ginny looked compassionate on hearing this, but Bill seemed

confused. “Are you trying to say Mars got depressed while he was a Spirit Defender?” he asked.

“Wouldn't you be if you were baneeshed to zat 'orrible desert for eleven years?”

“Banished?” Harry and Hermione whispered, looking at each other in surprise. Mrs. Weasley looked uncomfortable at what Fleur had said.

“I would be depressed and so would you, Fleur, but this is Mars we're talking about,” Bill responded. “It's his nature to seek out new magical knowledge, and he enjoys picking fights with evil nasties. In fact, I can't think of any two things he likes doing more; and he got plenty of each in America!”

“E is not a machine! You and Charlie should not treat 'eem like 'e as no feelings, because 'e does!” said Fleur fiercely.

Bill replied dryly. “She just thinks he's sensitive because he speaks French so well.”

Ron chuckled, but the other girls and Harry did not. Harry thought Bill had made a mistake; Fleur had crossed her arms and was staring out the window. There was a minute or so of stony silence until Hermione spoke up. “Fleur, what did you mean when you said Mars had been banished?”

Fleur was silent for a moment; finally, she looked over at Bill and shrugged. Bill sighed and spoke. “That, I'm afraid, is between Mars and Dumbledore, Hermione. You'll have to ask one of them.”

The passengers in the back seat looked at each other in confusion but said nothing. Harry had no problem believing that the strong-willed, self-assured Mars could get himself into trouble with the Ministry. However, he couldn't imagine Dumbledore having anything to do with banishing Mars. The two of them seemed to like and admire each other very much. Harry dwelt on this for a minute or so before he gave up, leaning back in the seat and relaxing. After all, he would be able to talk freely with his friends once

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they boarded the Hogwarts Express; and he was pretty sure he knew what the main topic of discussion would be.

They arrived at King's Cross with plenty of time to spare and leisurely unloaded the truck. As they were arranging the baggage, a familiar gravelly voice rang out.

“Nice vehicle ya got there, Weasley. Real inconspicuous,” growled Mad-Eye Moody, appearing out of nowhere.

“Can it really fly at 350mph?” asked a middle-aged blond woman who had Tonks' voice.

Ginny and Hermione squealed “Tonks!” and ran to hug her.

“Yes, Tonks, it does fly that fast, and don't try to scare me, Mad-Eye. Mars told me several of you would be tailing us,” answered Bill, smiling, as he reached out to shake Moody's hand.

“Still a child to be coddled!” Harry thought venomously. “But Mars and Bill couldn't really keep the Order members from following me. I must stop being so touchy, I'm in the Alliance now. Acting childish will only prove to the Order that I can't be trusted.” Harry smiled and greeted Mad-Eye and Tonks along with Ron.

“Kingsley and Snape are in a right state, Weasley,” Moody said to Bill as they started walked towards Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters. “They're furious about the last two raids—” Moody quit talking when he noticed the teenagers listening avidly. Bill noticed this and waved his hand in their direction.

“Mad-Eye, they're as tied up in this struggle as we are. Ignoring this won't help. Mars is adamant about the role they're destined to play, and Dumbledore believes him.”

Moody merely grunted and fell silent.

Ron beamed at Bill's pronouncement of trust. Harry, however, was confused, and he noticed that Ginny and Hermione also looked puzzled. Destined? Was Bill saying Mars could see into the future? Harry remembered Luna's claim that Mars was a powerful

Seer, and that Hermione had heard some American wizards saying the same thing. Harry's experiences with Divination, however, had rarely been convincing. Neither of his Divination teachers, Professor Trelawney and the centaur Firenze, had ever taught Harry anything he considered useful. He didn't like to associate Mars with that sort of pseudo-magic gobbledygook.

The group made their way to the barrier between platforms nine and ten and then discreetly passed through it, a few at a time. Harry stared hungrily at the Hogwarts Express as it sat on its tracks, steam puffing merrily out of its stack. The sights, sounds and even the smells raised his spirits. He would be at Hogwarts this very day, he would feast on the best of foods when they arrived, and sleep in a magnificent four-poster bed. This had been the best summer of his life because almost all of it had been spent with the Weasleys, but there was still no place like Hogwarts to Harry.

Harry looked around at the students loading onto the train, and could not believe how short most of them were. In fact, they looked so young he was driven to ask Hermione a question.

“Did they allow younger students into Hogwarts this year?”

“Well, they sometimes make an exception and let in really talented kids before they're eleven, but it's rather rare,” answered Hermione.

“I swear, most of this lot look a lot younger than we did back in our first year,” said Ron.

Harry nodded in agreement.

Bill and Tonks helped everyone load their trunks and Harry's Galaxy Globe onto the train, and then everyone left the train again to say their goodbyes on the platform. Mrs. Weasley hugged the teens and then coughed.

“Now, I suspect this will be a very interesting year for you. The classes get very challenging at the NEWT study levels. You will be working very hard, but I am sure

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you'll enjoy yourselves immensely. Wouldn't you agree, Bill?" Mrs. Weasley was smiling exactly as she had two summers ago when they were leaving on the train. At that time she, Bill and Charlie had known that the Triwizard Tournament was to be held again at Hogwarts, and they had teased the boys mercilessly about the upcoming term.

"Oh, yes. This should be your best year yet. I'm jealous," answered Bill, who was wearing the same smile. Fleur, too, had a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

"What are you three trying to get us all worked up about?" asked Ron.

"I suspect you'll find out soon enough. Now get on the train, dears, it's about to leave," said Mrs. Weasley, pushing Ron up the steps. The teenagers clambered aboard the train.

Ginny called out the open window, exasperated, "Mother, what are you three grinning about?"

Mrs. Weasley's only answer was a parting wave as the Hogwarts Express started rolling out of the station.

"What are they on about?" muttered Ginny crossly.

"Well, it can't be the Triwizard Tournament again. It's only held every five years," said Hermione.

"If they ever hold another one, you mean. After all that went wrong last time, I bet you'd have a hard time getting the other schools to join in," Ron commented.

Harry nodded. He remembered all too well the unplanned events of the last tournament.

Uncomfortably, Harry noticed that the others were all staring at him. "What?" he asked.

"Well, it's just – just that we have to go up to the prefect's carriage for a while; remember?" Hermione said shyly.

"Oh, that's right. Well, I'll try to find Neville or Dean, then," said Harry, putting on

a brave face. He was determined not to seem jealous that his closest friends were all prefects.

The three prefects started for the front of the train, but Ron seemed to be lagging behind, as though reluctant to leave Harry just yet. Hermione gently tugged him along, and Harry was left alone with Hedwig. He started walking down the train, looking for fellow Gryffindors. He passed quite a few members of Dumbledore's Army, who greeted him brightly. Harry passed compartment after compartment full of happy chatting students without finding one with room he could hold for the other three. He was starting to get discouraged when he saw Luna Lovegood alone in a carriage. She was, as usual, reading a copy of the Quibbler. He had come to like Luna quite a bit this summer, so he opened the door.

“Hullo, Luna. Is it all right if we sit in here?” Harry smiled at her.

“Birds of a feather flock together,” answered Luna in a sing-song voice.

“Er—” Harry responded. He wasn't sure if that meant yes or no. She was smiling at him, so Harry decided it must be a yes. “Thanks!” he said, sitting down across from Luna.

“Were you talking about your owl?” asked Luna in a dreamy voice.

“Huh? Er—I don't think so,” answered Harry in surprise.

“You asked 'Is it all right if we sit in here with you?', but I only see you and your owl,” stated Luna, staring into Harry's eyes.

“Oh, I get you. No, I didn't mean Hedwig. Ron, Ginny and Hermione are all in the prefect's carriage for now, but they'll need seats after a while,” answered Harry in relief.

“Mars was at Ginny's prefect party,” said Luna blandly.

Harry was now accustomed to Luna's non sequiturs. He knew she generally followed with another comment that might be meaningful, so he just nodded.

“I hope we see him again. I've never met a wizard like that before,” Luna continued, in the most normal voice Harry had ever heard her use. He looked up to catch

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her expression, but she had gone back to reading the Quibbler, so he could no longer see her face. While Luna was likable, she was certainly not as much fun as Ron, Hermione or Ginny, thought Harry.

Several of his friends dropped in to say hello over the next hour or so: Dean and Seamus, Hannah and Ernie and even Neville. Harry asked Neville to stay, but Neville seemed nervous at the way Luna was staring at him, so he left after a short visit.

Shortly after Neville had left the compartment, the door opened again. It was Cho Chang and her friend, Marietta Edgecombe. Harry was not sure by which girl's presence he was more taken aback. Marietta had joined and then betrayed Harry's secret dark arts defense study group last year. Because of her betrayal, she had suffered disfiguring pocks across her face spelling "SNEAK." She had been in the hospital the rest of the year because Madam Pomfrey could not reverse the hex; but she now stood before Harry, pock-free and smiling. Cho was also smiling at him. Last year Cho had been furious at Hermione for hexing the club's sign up sheet without telling anyone, causing Marietta's pocks. Why were they both now smiling at Hermione's close friend?

"Hello Harry. Did you have a good summer?" Cho beamed.

"Yes, it was quite good," answered Harry, trying not to stutter with surprise.

Both girls greeted Luna cheerfully and she returned their greeting, setting down the Quibbler and staring at Harry again. Cho and Marietta then sat down on either side of Harry, which made him nervous. Harry was even more on edge when Cho grabbed his right hand with both of hers after she sat down. However, it was Marietta who spoke.

"Harry, I really want to apologize for snitching on the study group last year. I wish I'd never had done it! My mother put so much pressure on me to help that Umbridge cow that I finally gave in. I know I shouldn't have, Harry. Please forgive me." Marietta sounded very sincere.

Harry looked at her, remembering how furious he had been with her last year. But

then he remembered how his own mistakes had led to Sirius' death. Having his club disbanded and Dumbledore temporarily exiled paled in comparison. Harry could see no reason to not forgive her.

“Those were tough times. We all make mistakes,” said Harry gently. He was still resentful in his heart, but he hoped that it would pass. He felt Cho squeezing his hand tighter and leaning on him. Last year on the train ride to Hogwarts, Harry would have given anything for this kind of attention from Cho, but now it made him uneasy. He said the first thing that popped into his head, and immediately regretted it.

“I see Madam Pomfrey finally removed that hex.”

Marietta's face lost its happiness, but she didn't look as angry as Harry expected. She took a breath and then managed a small smile. “Actually she had no idea how to counter Granger's jinx,” Marietta sneered slightly on the word “Granger.” “The day after I got home from Hogwarts I had a visitor. My mum didn't want to let him see me, but he told her he could counter the hex, so she relented. He was a friend of yours, you know.”

“A friend of mine? Who?” asked Harry.

“A tall American wizard named Mars,” she said, smiling.

“Mars? He was at your house the day after the term ended?” said Harry in surprise.

“Yes. He told me he'd just arrived from Texas, and that Professor Dumbledore had asked him to see if he knew the counter-curse to my condition,” replied Marietta, frowning slightly.

“And obviously he cured her!” Cho piped in happily. She was now leaning her head on Harry's shoulder.

Marietta smiled again and said, “He visited me a second time three weeks later. He told me the counter-curse wasn't really difficult, but it was exotic so very few people in Britain would know it. He told me that he'd come by to make sure I was doing all right, but he ended up asking a lot of questions about you, Dumbledore's Army, Umbridge and

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lots of other things from last year. I was happy enough to help him. I hadn't though I'd ever get over that hex."

"But you did," said Cho. "And Dumbledore's back at the school and we'll never see that foul Umbridge woman again. Oh Harry, can't it be the way it was before all this mess started? Can't you stop being so furious with me?"

Harry was flabbergasted. She had been the one who was always getting upset. What was she driving at? Harry took a deep breath and asked as calmly as he could, "What makes you think I'm furious with you?"

"Well, you ignored me all summer. You didn't respond to my letter or the birthday card I sent. Didn't you like the present?" asked Cho, staring at him with large, dark and beautiful eyes.

Harry's anger melted. It was easy to be mad at Cho when she was arguing, but seeing her now so desperate to make amends, it was impossible not to give in. "Okay," was the only word Harry managed to get past the lump in his throat.

"Oh, Harry!" she gasped. Cho looked as though she was about to throw herself onto Harry when Marietta interrupted.

"Cho, we need to go see Mandy. She's expecting us." Marietta looked like she wanted to leave immediately.

"Oh, all right," replied Cho grudgingly, and she rose to leave the compartment.

Harry stood to be polite, and was about to say goodbye when Cho spun, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him squarely on the lips. Harry was caught off-guard and didn't even try to push her off. His momentary confusion was worsened when the carriage door was opened at that moment by none other than Ginny Weasley. Ginny froze in mid-step and her surprised look turned sour as Cho released Harry from her lip lock. Harry, regaining some of his motor functions, glanced quickly around the room. Luna was looking as dreamy as ever, staring at Ron in the doorway. Ginny and Marietta

were both glaring at Cho, while Hermione and Ron were staring at Harry with shocked expressions.

“See you at the feast, Harry! Nice to see you all again,” said Cho brightly as she and the scowling Marietta weaved their way through Ron, Ginny, Hermione, and the doorway.

Harry fell back onto the seat and put his hands on his forehead. He had no idea what to say to his newly-arrived friends. Hermione and Ron sat on either side of him, while Ginny sat beside Luna, opposite Harry, next to the window.

“I thought you two were finished after that last row you had about her friend being hexed?” asked Ron carefully.

“So did I, mate. I'm as confused as you,” replied Harry through his hands.

Ginny made a quiet hissing noise. Harry noticed her arms were crossed and she was staring out the window. That pose was getting quite familiar to him.

“I wonder who knew the counter curse to the Siamese Spy Spotting Spell? I thought Dumbledore would know it, but Edgecombe still had the pocks when she left Hogwarts. Maybe he did it later?” wondered Hermione.

“Dumbledore didn't know it, but he did ask Mars to go and see her,” answered Harry.

“Mars cured her?” asked both Ron and Hermione. Even Ginny stopped sulking and looked back at Harry.

“Yeah, she said he came by the day after last term, and again three weeks later. He asked a lot of questions about our school year and about me and you guys,” said Harry.

Harry was going to elaborate on his conversation with Marietta and Cho, but suddenly he had a strong feeling of being watched. He couldn't say what had triggered it, but the feeling was unambiguous. He glanced around the carriage. There was no one standing at the door, and nothing at the outside window. Harry even glanced up at the

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luggage racks and under the opposing seats. He knew he had to be imagining things, but he was unable to convince himself. He stopped searching and looked at his friends. Hermione seemed to still be deep in thought about Marietta and Cho. Ron and Ginny, on the other hand, were looking at him with puzzled faces. Harry sighed and leaned back into his seat.

Ginny finally broke the silence. "Mars certainly seems to get around."

Everyone, even Luna, nodded in agreement.

Another awkward silence was interrupted by the food trolley. Harry was very glad to have his friends back with him, so he insisted on treating them all to various cakes and sweets. They ate merrily for a while (with the exception of Ginny, who was still sulking), trading Chocolate Frogs and Bertie's All-Flavor Beans, until Hermione turned to a more serious topic.

"I wonder who Dumbledore's hired to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts this year?"

"It can't help but be an improvement, can it? Even Lockhart was better than Umbridge," said Ron.

"Not by much," Harry grimaced.

"Well, whoever it is, they certainly assigned a strange book for the class," said Hermione, pulling a book out of her bag. "This is an astronomy book, for goodness' sake, and most of it was written by two muggles!"

"What?"

"Odd, isn't it?" Hermione said. "A witch is the actual author, but a majority of the pages are tables made by Tycho Brahe and one of his students. The author merely corrects them in places and adds some commentary."

"Who's Tycho Brahe?" asked Ginny.

"He was a 16th century Danish astronomer. He's well known to muggles in

astronomy; I found him in muggle textbooks,” answered Hermione.

“But why would astronomy be a Defense Against the Dark Arts textbook?” asked Ron.

“That's what I've been wondering ever since your mum brought our school stuff back from Diagon Alley,” said Hermione.

“Actually, I'm more worried about our Care of Magical Creatures professor,” said Harry.

“Why?” asked Ron and Ginny.

“Because we didn't see him at my birthday party, at the meeting, or at Bill and Fleur's wedding,” Harry frowned.

“Do you think he's in Tomintoul? Er—seeing some old friends?” suggested Hermione.

Harry knew she meant that Hagrid might be spying on the Giants that Mars had reported in Tomintoul. He glanced at Luna to see she was growing suspicious, but she had her face buried in the Quibbler.

“He might very well be. I just hope he's back by the time we get off the train,” replied Harry.

The others nodded.

Hermione pulled out the Daily Prophet and started reading it. Ron and Harry started talking about Quidditch, and after a while Ginny stopped sulking and joined in. After about forty minutes, Hermione let out a shriek of indignation.

“I don't believe it!”

“What's wrong?” Ron asked Hermione.

“That Skeeter woman is back at it, taking shots at Dumbledore again. She's claiming he's getting senile, and calling on him to step down as Headmaster of Hogwarts,” answered Hermione crossly. “No mention of any of us, though.”

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Harry glanced at Luna, who still had her nosed buried in the Quibbler, and then asked Hermione, “Does that violate the agreement you had with her?”

“Not the letter of it, but certainly the spirit. I'm not surprised at her treachery, though; she isn't exactly made of high moral fiber, is she?” sneered Hermione.

“Careful, Hermione. I don't think Rita Skeeter would risk her freedom by violating your agreement so openly unless she had some kind of plan to deal with you,” warned Ginny.

Hermione pondered Ginny's words.

“Ginny's right, Hermione,” Harry spoke up. “That Skeeter woman maybe a cow, but she's not stupid.”

“I wonder what's she playing at?” asked Hermione thoughtfully.

Harry again suddenly had the feeling of being watched. This time it was so strong that he got up and looked around, in and on top of things in the carriage. He made no attempt to hide that he was looking for something.

“What are you looking for?” asked Ron.

“Oh, nothing. I just—oh, forget it.”

“No, what was it?” Ron demanded.

“Nothing, really. Er—shouldn't you three be patrolling the train or something?” Harry desperately attempted to change the subject.

“Oh, no! We've been neglecting our prefect duties,” squealed Hermione. “It's Ginny's first day, we can't have her told off already. C'mon, let's get going!”

The three prefects bustled into the corridor, leaving Luna and Harry alone. Luna looked at Harry and motioned for him to sit next to her. Harry moved to her side and she leaned over so her mouth was very near his ear.

She whispered faintly, “I felt it also.”

“Felt what?”

“Shh,” said Luna and she again moved close to his ear. “I felt someone watching or listening to us just now, just like you did. Don't let on that we know.”

Harry nodded, and tried to look natural as he peered around the room, returning to his seat across from Luna. Even though he was accustomed to Luna's somewhat tenuous grip on reality, he wasn't about to blow her off this time. He was positive that he felt something in the room, and she was the only one who also seemed to notice. The thirty minutes Harry spent waiting for Ron, Ginny and Hermione to come back was one of the longest half-hours in his life. He was actually glad Luna was there so when the prefects returned they wouldn't be tempted to discuss anything too sensitive.

Ron opened the door and sat down next to Harry. Ginny entered right behind Ron, and sat next to Luna. Both looked irritated, but it was Hermione's face that really caught Harry's attention. She entered behind Ginny, slamming the door as she came in. Her face was red with anger and she looked close to tears. She sat down next to Harry and immediately leaned her head down and put her hands over her face.

“What happened?” asked Harry anxiously.

“The head boy and girl were cross with us for being late on our patrols,” Ginny volunteered. “He snapped at us a little and left, but the head girl, Ester Spikes from Slytherin, was cracking to be mad at somebody. She told Hermione off for several minutes and was very insulting. It was all I could do to keep Ron from hexing her right then and there.”

“You should have let me, Ginny. The stupid cow deserved it,” Ron snarled. He was looking at Hermione with real concern.

“I'm afraid it's going to be a long year dealing with her,” said Hermione, sitting up. “She seems to have always disliked me, but it's a good thing that you didn't hex her, Ron; it would have only made things worse.”

“Hmph,” was Ron's only answer.

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When the train was a few minutes away from Hogsmeade Station, they changed hastily into their robes and then Ron, Ginny and Hermione left to supervise the disembarking of the students. Hermione had a basket for Crookshanks this year, which was a good thing, because there was only Harry and Luna to carry two owls and one very large ginger cat.

Harry left the train, with Luna close behind him, and began looking for Hagrid. He had just moved away from the train when he heard what he'd been hoping for.

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here!" called Hagrid's voice. "'C'mon, follow me, firs' years!"

"Hagrid!" Harry yelled out, waving madly.

"All right there, Harry?" Hagrid beamed at him.

Harry nodded and yelled, "See you at the feast!"

Every step seemed lighter now. It had seemed such a bad omen last year when Hagrid hadn't greeted him off the train, but now he was where he should be. Harry then remembered that for the first time he hadn't seen Malfoy or his cronies on the train ride. Things were looking bright indeed, he thought as he walked toward the carriages.

Harry found an empty carriage and Luna met up with him, bringing Pig. He looked at the thestrals that were pulling the carriage and smiled. Thestrals were horselike creatures, solid black, with no flesh—just skin and bones, and bat-like wings. The oddest thing about them, however, was that only people who had seen death up close could see them. Harry considered approaching one to rub its head, but stopped when he thought about how weird it would look to the other students if he appeared to be reaching out to stroke empty air.

Ron and Ginny approached him, smiling. "I feel a lot better seeing Hagrid here this time," said Ginny. Harry and Ron nodded.

Luna smiled at Ron and handed him Pigwidgeon, then climbed into the carriage.

Ginny and Ron followed her inside, and Harry looked around the station for Hermione. He finally spotted her speaking with the Head Boy. After a moment she finished the conversation and headed his way, looking annoyed.

“He's useless!” she hissed as she stomped up the steps into the carriage.

Harry followed her inside and closed the door. Hermione was complaining loudly.

“Malfoy and Parkinson as prefects along with a Slytherin head girl? It's almost enough to make me resign!”

“Didn't Jason say he would do something about them?” asked Ginny.

“He said he had no power over Ester and if I had a problem with her I should take it to her Head of House,” answered Hermione hotly.

“Complain to Snape about a Slytherin? Is he kidding? You might as well complain to the back wheel of this carriage for all the good it will do you!” snorted Ron.

The three prefects were grumpy for the entire carriage ride, so Harry was quite glad when they arrived at the grounds of Hogwarts and started walking towards the castle. The thought of food had always cheered Ron up in the past, and it was clearly no exception this time, as he was now all smiles.

As the five of them neared the entranceway, Ginny screamed.

“What's the matter?” yelled Harry and Ron, spinning around towards her.

Before she could answer, Blaise Zabini, a Slytherin sixth-year, also screamed. Harry looked at her and saw her wiping her side with her hand; something was oozing off it.

“Blech!” Blaise cried. “A rotten egg.” She was scowling.

An egg whizzed by Harry's face, missing him by inches. He turned and was unsurprised to see Peeves squealing in delight at the chaos he was causing. Professor McGonagall came out of the entranceway to collect the first years and saw Peeves throw an egg at the first years, causing them to scream and scatter. Her mouth was very thin.

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“Peeves!” she screamed. “How dare you assault the first years before they even get into the castle? You'll scare them half to death!”

“Just giving them a little exercise,” yelled Peeves between cackles. He hit a first year boy right in the back, scaring him so much that he knocked down four other first years in his flight.

“I mean it, Peeves. You'll pay for this,” said McGonagall in a deadly serious voice.

Peeves gave McGonagall a great raspberry and flung the entire remaining basket of eggs onto Katie Bell. Katie was covered head to toe in foul-smelling egg ooze. She stared at Peeves' fleeing form with tears of fury in her eyes. She let out one loud, furious scream after him and then stomped inside, presumably heading for the girls' baths.

“You'll pay, Peeves. I promise you. You just wait till tomorrow,” snarled McGonagall. “First years, line up over here. Quickly now!”

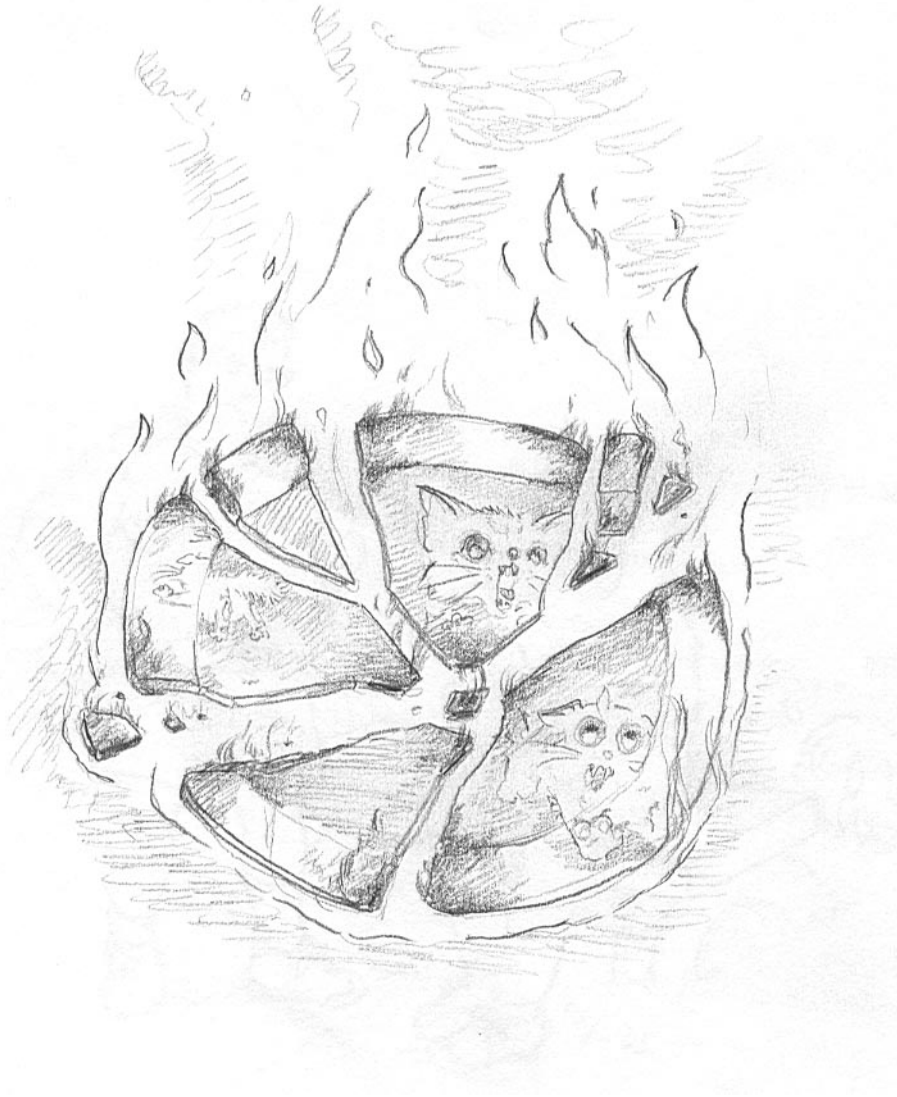
As Harry passed Professor McGonagall he could hear her muttering, “Oh I can't wait till tomorrow. I can't wait. He'll straighten you out, all right.”

“Peeves really hacked off McGonagall off this time,” said Ron.

“I hope she evicts him!” hissed Ginny angrily as she wiped egg off herself with a handkerchief of Harry's.

They headed towards the Great Hall for the feast, Hermione and Ginny growling in anger while Harry's and Ron's stomachs growled in hunger.

Chapter Eleven – The New Defense Against the Dark Arts Teacher



Harry approached the Great Hall looking forward to the feast like never before. He couldn't remember ever being this hungry. As they neared the Great Hall, they saw Professor Sinistra talking to an attractive middle-aged blond witch wearing an elegant sky-blue robe.

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“The witch that's talking to Professor Sinistra there, isn't that Jo Anne Lennon?”

Ginny pointed.

“It *is* her!” replied Ron. “What's *she* doing here?”

“Oh, please, no. Oh, please, don't let it be her!” said Hermione desperately.

“What do you mean?” asked Harry.

“I mean, please don't let her be the new Defense Against Dark Arts Teacher.”

Harry, Ron and Ginny all flinched.

“No! Dumbledore wouldn't allow it, would he?” asked Harry.

Before anyone could answer, Professor Sinistra and Jo Anne Lennon noticed Harry and walked towards him, smiling. Harry had a very bad feeling about the situation.

“Harry, how lovely to finally meet you in person,” said Lennon, beaming down at Harry as she held out her hand.

Harry nervously reached out and shook it.

Professor Sinistra was also beaming at Harry. She said glowingly, “Harry and Ron Weasley here are my best students, Jo Anne. They were the only ones to get Outstanding on their OWLs last term, and they did it under very difficult circumstances.”

Ron smiled; Hermione looked very cross indeed.

“Well, I'm not surprised that Harry is such an outstanding student, and of course any Weasley is bound to excel,” added Lennon as she shook Ron and Ginny's hands. She sighed happily and looked around the room. “It's so nice to be back at Hogwarts, and it's been so so long. I had some great memories as a girl here. Obviously my favorite teacher was Dumbledore; his transfiguration classes were simply superb. Oh, I see Professor McGonagall coming with the first years. Lovely, lovely, I do look forward to witnessing a sorting again, I was so nervous when I was sorted. Well, see you all in the Great Hall.” Lennon said this as light- heartedly as a young girl starting a new year at Hogwarts. She and Professor Sinistra headed into the hall.

“She's certainly a lot better than Umbridge, don't you think?” asked Ron, grinning.

Hermione sighed loudly and pushed past everyone, marching into the Hall.

Professor McGonagall was approaching with the first years and Harry, remembering how irritable Peeves had made her, hurried in himself, gently pushing the Weasleys in front of him.

They took their seats at the Gryffindor table: Harry sat next to Ron, while Hermione and Ginny sat opposite them. Harry noticed that Hagrid was already at the staff table; Lennon was sitting next to Dumbledore, the two of them chatting amicably. Hermione sighed deeply. Harry glanced at her and saw that she also was looking at Lennon.

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but just then the doors to the Great Hall opened and Professor McGonagall entered, leading the line of first years. Silence fell as the chatting students turned their attention to the frightened-looking new arrivals. When McGonagall reached the front of the Hall, she placed a three-legged stool before the first years, and put an extremely old, dirty patched wizard's hat on top of it. The first years gawked at the hat in mingled apprehension and confusion. After a few seconds of near silence in the Hall, a long tear near the bottom of the hat opened wide like a mouth, and it broke into song:

For centuries I've sorted wizards;
I've seen the great ones rise and fall.
They began their studies just like you
Before me in this very Hall.
To help them on their way to greatness,
I carried out my sacred task:

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To place each in a Hogwarts House.
What is the good of that, you ask?
Well, over a thousand years ago,
Hogwarts began with founders four:
The sterling wizards of their age,
Who longed to pass on their great lore.
Each valued one trait above the rest;
The students were split into four parts
Based on what they revered the most:
In Gryffindor went the bravest hearts;
To Ravenclaw the wisest went;
In Hufflepuff, hard work was prized;
For Slytherins, ambition ruled.
This way was best, the four surmised.
How would we sort when the four were gone?
Gryffindor knew, and whipped off his hat.
He and the others threw in some brains,
And so upon this stool I'm sat.
Now please don't fear to try me on,
I was not put here to sing this song,
But to place you in the perfect house;
Trust me, I've not yet been wrong!

The hat fell silent when it finished its song, and the students at the tables all clapped and cheered loudly. Professor McGonagall raised her hand for silence.

"When I call out your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool," she told

the first years. "When the hat announces your House, you will go and sit at the appropriate table."

"Allen, Renee!"

"SLYTHERIN!!!"

"That was a lot cheerier song than last year," said Harry, who wasn't very interested in the sorting any more.

"Yes, it was; the whole staff seems to be in a better mood. I'm not sure how they can be, with Voldemort gathering strength and that CADS woman being forced upon them," replied Hermione darkly.

"Right little ray of sunshine, aren't you?" Ron taunted.

"Evans, Mark!"

"Mark Evans?" Harry exclaimed, startled.

"That's what she said, Harry. Do you know him or something?" asked Ron.

"Yeah, he's a muggle—well, I thought he was—from Little Whinging," answered Harry.

All of his friends stared along with Harry at a boy with dark red hair who was now walking nervously up to the stool. His brilliant green eyes were fearful as he put on the sorting hat.

"That's him, all right. I don't think Dudley will be beating him up again," said Harry with a slight smile.

The hat thought for a bit and then yelled clearly "GRYFFINDOR!!!"

Harry clapped loudly along with the other Gryffindors as Mark Evans came over to the Gryffindor table and sat at the first available seat. He looked relieved to be out of the limelight.

"Did you know him very well?" Hermione asked Harry.

"Not really, no. All of the muggles in the neighborhood avoided me," answered

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Harry.

“Harrick, Sarah!”

“SLYTHERIN!!!”

“Get on with it!” grumbled Ron, along with his stomach.

“King, Nathan!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!!!”

“Cheer up, Ron. We'll eat soon. Look, Hagrid's waving at us,” said Ginny, waving back at the teacher's table.

“Lovel, Gary!”

“SLYTHERIN!!!”

“Midgaard, John!”

“RAVENCLAW!!!”

“Look at that guy. He doesn't look like a wizard, he probably just pretends he's one,” said Ron quietly to Harry. Harry agreed.

They paid little more attention to the sorting until Heather Parkinson's name was called. She was a cute blond girl with a friendly face, and seemed to have nothing in common with her older sister Pansy except hair color. However, when she was sorted into Slytherin, Pansy and her gang of girls all screamed loudly and hugged her when she ran over to their table.

“Great, just what we needed, another Parkinson cow around here,” complained Hermione loudly. Ginny and Ron nodded in agreement.

“Sladen, Mary Sue!”

“GRYFFINDOR!!!”

Harry and the others applauded loudly along with the rest of their table.

“Smythe, Robert!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!!!”

“Robert Smith? Isn't he in The Cure?” asked Dean Thomas.

“That's what I thought,” Harry grinned.

“What's The Cure?” asked Ginny.

“Just a bunch of whiners with guitars,” Dean snorted.

Ginny and Ron exchanged confused looks.

When the sorting was finally finished, Dumbledore stood up to address his pupils.

“There is a time for speeches,” said Dumbledore, and paused. “And that time is after we eat. Tuck in!” He then threw his beard over his shoulder, sat down, and started to shovel food onto his plate from the magically-filled platters in front of him.

Harry and Ron cheered and started digging in. Hermione looked appalled at the exuberance Harry and Ron displayed as they attacked their meal. Harry ignored her distasteful looks; he was far too famished and the food was too excellent to care. Ron was paying his roast beef too much attention to even notice Hermione's disapproval.

A few minutes after the feast had started, Katie Bell returned from the baths with her hair still wet, smelling a lot better. She sat down next to Hermione and started filling her plate. Once Katie had settled down and was eating happily, Hermione asked her a question.

“Katie, did you noticed any differences when you first started your NEWT level classes last year?”

Katie swallowed her food and answered, “Oh yes. Because you take fewer courses, some classes are smaller. Some subjects have so few students all four Houses are in a single class.”

“That's what we wanted, more classes with Slytherins. Just great,” interjected Ron mournfully.

Harry sighed in disgust as he looked at the Slytherin table and saw Malfoy pompously gesturing to some of his fellow Slytherins. He looked away and glanced

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straight at Ginny, who smiled warmly at him.

“Cassiopeia,” she said.

“Huh?”

“Cassiopeia, that's the new Gryffindor password. The Head Boy gave us a sealed envelope that contained it.”

“Okay, thanks Ginny.” Harry smiled back at her.

“That reminds me,” said Ron around a mouthful of food. “I know I've heard that word before, but I can't place it.”

“Cassiopeia? Of course you've heard it before. It's a famous constellation in the Milky Way!” snapped Hermione. “Honestly! ...” Hermione seemed to cut herself short with an effort.

Harry was relieved. He was quite sure that she had been about to say something nasty about Ron beating her on the Astronomy OWL and Harry didn't want to listen to her and Ron squabble with each other all night.

When the desserts were finished the familiar post-feast sleepy feeling came over Harry. He yawned quietly and looked up at Dumbledore to see if he, too, was done eating. Harry's timing was excellent, as Dumbledore was now standing up to address the students again.

“Now that our stomachs are full, I have a few announcements to make. Our first year students should know that the forest is forbidden to all students unless accompanied by a Teacher. For some reason I need to keep reminding our older students of this every year.” He smiled at the Gryffindor table; Harry and his chums exchanged guilty grins.

“The school caretaker, Argus Filch, would like me to remind all students that magic in the halls between classes is not permitted. Also of note, twenty-seven new things have been added to the list of banned items at Hogwarts. To see the list in its entirety, please stop by Mr. Filch's office.

“Quidditch trials for the House teams will be held during the second week of classes. Please see Madam Hooch if you wish to try out for your team.

“I think that is all we have for the evening. Sleep well, so that you get off to a great start for the new school year!”

Dumbledore then sat back down and started chatting with Jo Anne Lennon.

“He didn't introduce her as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher,” exclaimed Ron.

“Maybe he wanted to avoid another long boring speech like Umbridge's,” suggested Harry.

The students started departing the Great Hall amid chatter and yawns. Ron jumped up next to the Gryffindor House table and barked loudly.

“All right, Gryffindor first years, queue up right here, right now!”

The first years all scrambled quickly to line up in front of him.

“This badge,” said Ron, tapping the scarlet-and-gold piece of metal on his chest, “means that I am a prefect. Make very sure that you listen to and obey any requests that any of us give. Have you lot got that?”

“Yes!” they answered in unison. Harry thought they looked a bit intimidated.

“Now, you will be following me to the Gryffindor common room. It's in a secret location only Gryffindors know, and the route isn't easy, so pay attention! No straying off either. See those two girls there?” Ron pointed to Hermione and Ginny; all the terrified first years looked at the two girls. “They'll be following us to the common room, so don't even think about skiving off anywhere. I can assure you that they have a nasty temper when it comes to dealing with disobedient little first years! Go on out to the entrance hall and wait for us.”

The first years immediately scrambled out through the doors.

Ron grinned evilly. “Hermione told me to take my prefect duties more seriously

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this year, so I figured to have fun doing it.”

Harry smiled back and cuffed him on the shoulder.

“Well, Ron, you were a bit harsh, but I guess that was a good start,” said Hermione.

The three prefects followed the first years into the entrance hall. Harry trailed along behind them, along with Dean and Seamus, looking forward to a nice comfy bed. Once upstairs, he quickly fell fast asleep, dreaming something about Cho, Quidditch, and then something about a tall blond woman with steel gray eyes, but he couldn't remember what.

The next morning Harry awoke with Ron and they walked down for breakfast together. Hermione and Ginny were already at the Gryffindor table and were half finished with their meals.

“Why are you two so late?” demanded Ginny.

“I'm surprised they made it down here at all after how they pigged out last night,” snapped Hermione.

“It is a feast, you know, Hermione. You're supposed to eat a lot and enjoy yourself, I mean otherwise what's the difference between a feast and this breakfast?” replied Ron as he sat down next to Harry.

“There's a difference between feasting and making a pig of yourself.”

“One day, Hermione, you might actually relax and enjoy yourself, you know? We'd probably have to have you committed to St Mungo's, though, I don't know if your brain could handle not being neurotic.”

Hermione looked insulted and the two began bickering at full steam.

Harry sighed and reached for the bacon and toast. He had experienced enough of Ron and Hermione's arguments to know they would be sniping at least until break.

After a few minutes, Ginny interrupted their argument. “Ron, if you don't quit bickering soon, you'll miss breakfast altogether. You two have all year to squabble, you know. You don't have to get it completely out of the way on the first day.”

Both Ron and Hermione turned a bit pink and started eating again.

Professor McGonagall came by, handing out the course schedules. “Don't think it is easier just because you have fewer subjects in your sixth year. The work will be much harder.” She passed them and continued down the Gryffindor table.

All the sixth years except Hermione groaned in unison.

“Much harder than last year? They nearly killed us!” whimpered Parvati Patil.

“What a way to start the week, Double Defense Against the Dark Arts with that Lennon woman!” snarled Ginny.

“How can you have that class this morning, Ginny? Harry and I have it too!” asked Ron.

“Maybe there's a mistake on one of the schedules?” added Hermione, puzzled.

“Professor McGonagall!” called Ginny, waving at her.

McGonagall approached and stood between Ginny and Hermione. “Yes?”

“There must be a mistake with the schedules. Ginny is in the same Defense Against the Dark Arts class as Harry, Ron and I,” stated Hermione.

“Of course there hasn't been a mistake, Miss Granger. Now you lot best get moving before you are late for class. That would make a terrible *first* impression with your new Teacher,” she replied. Her mouth twitched as though stifling a laugh as she turned towards the entrance hall.

“What gives?” muttered Ron.

Harry shrugged at him, grabbed his bag and stood up. Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Seamus, Dean, Neville, Lavender and Parvati all followed Harry to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

Harry noticed that Ginny wasn't the only fifth year in his class; Colin Creevey was also entering the door a few feet in front of him. When Harry got inside he saw Katie Bell talking to Cho Chang; that meant seventh years were also in the class. Luna Lovegood

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was sitting near the front, and Ginny took a seat next to her.

Harry thought that they must be paired with the Ravenclaws, but then Hannah Abbott, Ernie McMillan, Susan Bones and Justin Finch-Fletchley from Hufflepuff all walked in. Harry turned to Hermione and said, “An odd assortment, wouldn't you say?”

Marietta Edgecombe then walked by Harry, smiling at him, and sat next to Cho.

“You know what I think, Harry?” said Hermione, her face glowing. “I think this class is all of the returning students that were in Dumbledore's Army last year.”

As if to quell any doubts Harry might have about Hermione's theory, Michael Corner, Terry Boot, Anthony Goldstein and Zacharias Smith all walked in, looking timid. They were followed by Padma Patil, who went and sat beside her twin and Lavender Brown.

“Oh Harry, this is wonderful,” Hermione beamed.

“Yeah, mate, you must have made some impression on Dumbledore!” added Ron.

“I wonder why that Lennon woman is so late to her first class? She struck me as a very punctual type of person,” said Ginny, loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Most of the class nodded or murmured in agreement.

Harry then heard a song in the air – a beautiful song he had heard once before, while he was at 4 Privet Drive. It can't be, he thought, and then he saw a small bird fly into the room and land on Ginny's arm. Ginny gasped.

“Lily! What are you doing here?” she stammered, stroking the downy woodpecker. Luna reached over and petted Lily also.

“Do you think this means Mars is keeping an eye on you while you're here, Harry?” asked Hermione.

“Could be. He was really furious that Voldemort had managed to attack me so many times while he was stuck in Texas,” answered Harry. He felt a little miffed that Mars worried about him even at Hogwarts, but it was nice to hear Lily's wonderful song

again.

Suddenly a loud explosion came from the back of the classroom and shook the desks. Most of the girls screamed and everyone covered their ears and turned. The large ornamental plates on the wall that Delores Umbridge had loved so much, decorated with those foul kittens, had all exploded, and their pieces were now smoldering into dust on the floor.

“Sorry to shock y'all like that, but I just cleaned out my office and if I had to look at those stupid kittens one more time I think I would've been ill,” a deep voice said from the front of the classroom.

Everyone's heads whipped around to see the owner of the voice. Harry, Ron and Hermione all gasped in surprise. Lavender and the Patil twins said “Oooh”, and Luna and Marietta shrieked in delight. The two girls leaped out of their desks and sprinted toward the tall figure now standing in front of the class. He was wearing expensive-looking, blood-red robes.

“Mars!” squealed Luna and Marietta, hugging him.

“Merlin's Beard! If I'd known I would get a greeting like this on my return to Hogwarts, I'd have come back a lot sooner!” said Mars, beaming around at the students.

“Mars, what are you doing here?” cried Ron. Hermione and Harry nodded, looking up at the American.

“I'm here to make the tea, doofus. What do you think I'm here for, Ron? I'm your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher,” replied Mars.

“No!” Hermione and Harry exclaimed together.

“What? Would you rather have Umbridge back? I guess I could fetch her out of Azkaban,” Mars teased. Luna and Marietta giggled.

“Of course not!” squeaked Hermione indignantly. “We were just surprised.”

“Happily surprised, Mars,” added Harry, whose face had lit up.

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“Excellent. Girls, go ahead and take your seats,” said Mars, gently pushing Luna and Marietta towards the desks. “For those of you who don't know me, my name is Mars. Simply Mars. There's no need to call me professor; I hope a title isn't necessary for you all to respect me. As you can tell from my accent, I'm from Texas; and oh, yes, I finished my seventh year at Hogwarts twelve years ago.

“I'll warn you up front, do not be taken in by my familiarity with several of your fellow students. I will not play favorites with marks, and I can guarantee you that my class will easily take more work than any three of your other courses combined.”

Everyone except Hermione murmured at this pronouncement; she only sat up straighter and prepared herself to take notes.

“I've only had a little time to look over the subjects that your previous teachers have covered, but I must say that you've only had two worthy teachers, Remus Lupin and Harry here,” said Mars, pointing at Harry.

Harry blushed, while Hermione and Ron beamed at him.

“I'm sure y'all have deduced that this class is based on the group you formed last year, Dumbledore's Army. It was my idea to have this advanced class; it seemed silly to put the fifth years through the normal course when Harry has already taught them everything.” Mars again grinned at Harry.

“Now, put those books away. Who ever heard of learning Defense Against the Dark Arts by reading? Please, there's no book in the world that can teach you the things that I can. You'll be studying those tables enough out of class; just leave them in your dorms.”

The students all happily stowed the books in their bags. Harry was excited; he couldn't think of someone that was more of an opposite to Umbridge.

“Today, I will give a demonstration of the class aims; then there is a simple but exotic spell that I want to teach you because of something Minerva said to me this

morning.”

He waved his wand and cried, “Elicio!” The torso of a large mannequin atop a three-foot pole appeared around the midpoint of the classroom's outside wall.

“We call this a tackling dummy in America, but it will do nicely as a target for practicing our combat spells. Everyone on that side of the room please squeeze in over here.”

After the students had shuffled over to the far side of the room, Mars waved his wand and the desks near the target disappeared, making a nice clear space around it.

“Harry, I've never seen your Stunning Charm, but I've heard it was very good. Go ahead and give that dummy a wallop for me, would you?” asked Mars.

Harry nodded and stepped out of the crowd. He rolled up the sleeves of his robe, waved his wand and shouted “Stupefy!” A red ray shot out of his wand and hit the dummy dead on. The stunner knocked the dummy into the wall; it bounced off and landed on the the floor with a thud.

“Excellent!” said Mars as the rest of the class applauded politely.

“Harry's Stunner is as good as any adult wizard's you'll find. A spell that good will get full marks on your NEWTs, but this class isn't really about passing exams. It's about defending yourself from the Dark Arts.

“Now then, who can tell me why Hogwarts is the best magic school in the world?” Mars asked the class.

Hermione, as usual, raised her hand immediately and, to Harry's surprise, so did most of the Ravenclaw students.

Mars pointed to Anthony Goldstein and said, “What's your name, son?”

Anthony looked surprised at this informal address, but he quickly replied, “Anthony Goldstein, sir.”

“What's your answer, Anthony?”

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“It has the best professors.”

“While Hogwarts has had great teachers, Anthony, so do many of the other schools. Not a bad try, though,” said Mars, then he pointed to Hermione. “Yes, Hermione?”

“Dumbledore. He is the greatest wizard of our time. He sets the tone for the rest of the staff,” answered Hermione confidently.

“Well, those two things are certainly true, but they are not the answer to my question. Hogwarts was the best wizarding school in the world centuries before our Headmaster was born.” Mars then pointed at Padma. “Let's have your name and answer, darlin'.”

She blushed a bit and said, “Padma Patil. The Hogwarts curriculum is what makes it so good. It covers the most important subjects and sets the proper priorities.” She sat down, trying not to giggle along with Parvati and Lavender.

“Excellent, Padma; not exactly what I was looking for, but very close. Take five points for Ravenclaw.”

Mars waved his wand and on the board behind him three large letters appeared.

“LCD,” he said. “Least Common Denominator. That is the key to Hogwarts' success in teaching young witches and wizards.” He glanced around the room and surveyed the confused looks on the students' faces, then smiled and continued. “Hogwarts has the highest level of competency among its former students of any wizarding school in the world. We have achieved this by zeroing in on the easiest way to cast the most effective spells. How well a spell works depends on many variables: Magical talent, motion of the wand, pronunciation of the incantation, time of day, time of year, the weather, and, when needed, the quality of the material components. The closer the caster gets to the optimum combination, the better the spell's result.

“Determining the optimum method for casting a spell is immensely complex, much

more complex than anything you've studied before. This is the reason LCD has been so important to Hogwarts: You have all been taught the easiest way to cast the most effective spells. You could cast more powerful spells than you do, but they would be harder to cast correctly, and without careful training you might fail at a crucial moment. Yes, Ginny?"

"Why would we want to risk messing up the spell, then?" she asked. Many of the students nodded, but Padma and Hermione both looked at Ginny scornfully.

"An excellent point, Ginny. Let me demonstrate," answered Mars. "Displacio!"

Hundreds of tiny red orbs flew from Mars' wand and glided over to the dummy. They surrounded it and stood the dummy gently up again. Hermione gasped.

"Now remember this: Harry's stunner was perfectly cast using the LCD method. I would say very few wizards in Britain could have cast a better Stunning Spell," said Mars and then he waved his wand, with a slightly exaggerated curl, and cried "Stupefy!" An enormous red column shot out the end of his wand – it was at least six times wider than Harry's. The stunner slammed into the center of the dummy; its edges trailed out past the dummy's sides and these parts of the ray hit the outside wall. The spell exploded as it hit the wall, and the room shook again.

The dummy ricocheted across the room, its midsection crushed. There were two holes in the wall where the edges of the stunner had made impact with it, and shafts of sunlight gleamed through each of them. The class sat silently in awe.

"Now who wants to learn to toss spells like that, eh? Hands up if you are for it!" exclaimed Mars, smiling brightly.

Hermione's and Padma's hands shot into the air. As the rest of the class recovered from their shock, their hands followed likewise.

"Good, good," said Mars. "Now, I –"

"Mars! What's going on in here? It sounds like a war zone!" barked Professor McGonagall, hurrying into the classroom.

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“Well, I was a little exuberant with a Stunning Charm, Minerva, but the students needed to see something impressive if I'm to convince them that all the hard work I'll be assigning is worth it,” said Mars, his eyes twinkling.

“That I can understand, but you can't just knock holes in the walls of the castle,” she said.

“Oh, no problem,” said Mars, waving his wand. “Reparo!” he barked, and the dust and bricks reintegrated back into the wall neatly.

“See, all fixed,” he said.

“Well, just be a bit more careful, Mars. And I think your Repairing Charm is a bit out of practice. Good day.” McGonagall turned and left the room.

“Out of practice? Hmph. She needs to look closer,” Mars muttered.

Harry looked over at the mended wall and thought Professor McGonagall had a point. The areas of the wall that Mars had repaired were a slightly different color from the rest.

“Okay, where were we? Oh yes, that was the demonstration of the course aims. Now we will have today's lesson. Which of you is Katie Bell?” asked Mars.

Katie shyly raised her hand. “I am, Professor,” she said.

“Just Mars will do, Katie. Minerva told me that Peeves has been rather horrible to you lately; is that true?” asked Mars kindly.

“Too right he has,” Katie agreed, nodding.

“Well let me show you all a spell we often use in America to deal with minor annoying spirits like poltergeists. First we will need a victim, ooops, I mean a volunteer.” Mars grinned evilly.

“Accio poltergeist!” he said, stabbing his wand forward.

For several seconds nothing happened, and then a faint screaming sounded from outside the classroom. The screaming grew in volume, and then Peeves shot through the

wall and stopped right in front of Mars.

Peeves had his back to Mars and looked very cross. He spun around angrily, looking violent, until his eyes met Mars'. A look of complete panic spread across his face.

“Oh, it-it's you Mars. Y-You're back at Hogwarts? How, how lovely. Yes, lovely that you're back,” said Peeves nervously.

“Thank you, Peeves. I really appreciate you volunteering to help us with this spell,” replied Mars, still grinning.

Harry and many of his classmates were chuckling.

“What? No, no. Peevesy stays out of the way of students learning. Oh yes, I promised the Headmaster,” said Peeves, slowly floating towards the door.

“No, I insist. Stay and help out for once. Simulacrumi Manus!” said Mars, thrusting his wand down. A large misty hand formed behind Peeves and grabbed him firmly.

Peeves screamed in surprise, and many of the students gasped.

“Now first, you move your wand like this,” said Mars who raised his wand up, looped it and then thrust it forward. “As you jab, say the incantation 'Multo Phasma'.” Mars demonstrated the spell against the board. An odd springing sound accompanied by a faint pink mist was all the students saw. “Okay, everyone stand and practice the spell a bit. Just aim the spell at the wall or into the air; it can only affect spirits, so we're all quite safe.”

Peeves was now whimpering as the whole class jabbed their wands and practiced the incantation. Hermione was thrilled when on her third try she managed to have a bit of mist come out. Padma Patil seemed to be having similar success. Mars was working with Katie, Ginny and Luna at the front of the class. Everyone seemed to be having fun except Cho. While Marietta, who was right next to her, was smiling brightly as she waved her wand, Cho seemed to be brooding and barely moving her wand at all. Harry stared at her, wondering what was wrong, when something suddenly stung his hand.

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“Ouch!” he yelped, jumping back a step. Everyone was staring at him, including Mars, who had his wand pointed at him.

“No loafing, Harry,” said Mars, winking. He then went back to working with the three girls.

Harry shook his hand and tried to ignore the snickers of Ron, Hermione and Neville. He turned so he couldn't be distracted by Cho anymore, and after a few corrections from Hermione, he and Ron both managed to have the mist and a bit of noise issue from their wands.

“Okay, I think we're ready to try the spell on our volunteer. Katie, come on up here, if you please,” said Mars as he motioned Katie to approach. When she reached him, Mars told her, “Let 'im have it!”

“Multo Phasma,” she said loudly. A springing sound rang out and a pink mist issued from her wand toward Peeves. The poltergeist shrieked in pain and was knocked back about ten feet, taking along the spectral hand that held him.

Katie grinned from ear to ear as she watched Peeves cursing her. Mars put his hand on her shoulder.

“Excellent, Katie,” said Mars. “As you can see, it does hurt him when it knocks him back, but the pain goes right away. It isn't much good against a really nasty spirit, but for nuisances like Peeves here it's excellent. I think he could use one more dose before we're through. Ginny, go ahead and take a shot.”

Ginny quickly moved to the front of the classroom and glared at Peeves in a way that made her highly resemble her twin brothers. She rolled up her robe sleeves, waved her wand, and cried, “Multo Phasma!”

Peeves screamed again, but this time he and the spectral hand that held him flew right through the wall and presumably into the corridor. Students in the class stood up and applauded Ginny's excellent spellwork – and of course Peeves getting some of his own

medicine. Ginny curtsied for the class, blushing. Mars waved his wand at the wall and Harry heard Peeves' cursing trailing off; Mars must have freed the poltergeist.

“Very good, Ginny and Katie! Take five points each for Gryffindor. Go ahead and return to your seats.” Mars used his wand to bring the vanished desks back into the classroom. He then pointed his wand at the board and a long explanation of the Spirit Slap Charm appeared.

“Copy this down and practice the spell so y'all know it well for the next session. Please note, this will hurt the castle's ghosts, so do not cast it on them, not even on old Moaning Myrtle. I will be very annoyed if I hear about any misuse of this or any spell I teach you. This advanced class will learn spells never taught at Hogwarts before, and I expect you all to be responsible with this knowledge. You are also not to teach your friends who are not in this class anything you learn here. This is a special class; any breaking of my rules and I'll chuck you in with the normal groups. Everybody with me on the rules?”

The students nodded and started copiously copying the notes on the board.

“You can leave when you have the notes jotted down.” Mars sat behind his desk and looked around at the students.

The faster writers in the class finished first, and it seemed everyone said goodbye to Mars as they left, except Cho. She walked past him quickly as Katie and Anthony approached Mars with a question.

“What's up with Cho?” asked Ron, who was standing next to Harry.

“I don't know, but she doesn't seem to like Mars much, does she?” answered Harry.

“Yeah, I wonder why,” replied Ron.

Harry and Hermione got up and the three of them headed towards Mars, who was chatting with Ginny and Luna. Halfway to the front, Hermione veered off towards the outside wall. Harry and Ron kept walking.

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“Mars, that lesson was brilliant! It's about time someone put Peeves in line,” Ron enthused. The others nodded.

“I certainly had a few tussles with Peeves when I was a student here. I figured it was about time the students were on a level playing field with him again,” answered Mars.

“Why did you zap me, anyway?” asked Harry.

“Well Harry, I have no problems with you ogling a pretty girl like Cho, but not while you're supposed to be practicing one of my lessons.”

Harry tried hard not to go pink, but he was positive he was failing.

“Mars, why didn't you aim your demonstration spell at Peeves when you cast it?” asked Ginny, who was the only one not chuckling at Mars' last remark.

“You saw what Mars' stunner was like, Ginny,” interjecting Hermione, joining them. “I don't think Peeves would have been in much shape for you and Katie to practice on if Mars had zapped him first.”

“My reasoning exactly, Hermione,” agreed Mars.

“We're very, very happy to have you as our professor! When we saw that Lennon woman at the feast last night, we were terrified she was to be the new teacher,” said Ginny.

“I don't blame you for being scared, Ginny. But don't worry, Professor Dumbledore won't make that kind of mistake again,” said Mars.

“Why was she here, anyway?” asked Ron.

“One last-ditch effort to convince us to support her to replace Fudge as the Minister of Magic. While I agree that she's very intelligent and charming, I don't trust her a lick,” answered Mars.

“More vapid than charming if you ask me,” said Hermione snidely.

“Well, y'all need to get moving. Harry, I'll need you to stop by my office at six

tonight after dinner. You're not in trouble or anything, just a few things to discuss. It's just school work; don't look so alarmed. Get going, go on," said Mars, shooing them out the door.

In the hallway, Ginny and Luna said goodbye as they sped up to catch to some other fifth years who were headed outside for break. The three sixth years followed them at a slower pace.

"What were you looking at along the wall, Hermione?" asked Ron.

"I wanted to see the repair job Mars did up close. He seemed pretty annoyed that Professor McGonagall sneered at it. Since he suggested she take a closer look, I decided to myself," answered Hermione.

"Well, she was right about that. The parts he repaired were a different color from the rest," added Harry.

"If you had looked at it closely like I did, Harry, you would have noticed the repaired bits looked different because those parts of the wall weren't faded and worn. Those bricks appeared brand new," said Hermione in a superior tone.

"You mean he made the wall better than it was before?" asked Ron. "That's pretty impressive."

Hermione nodded and then said, "It's supposed to be impossible." The three of them left the building and admired the beautiful fall day that was developing.

Chapter Twelve – A New Kind of Assignment



After break, Ron, Harry and Hermione had Charms with the Ravenclaws. The class included all the sixth year Gryffindors except Seamus, and every Ravenclaw in Harry's year. The three of them sat in the middle of the room and listened to tiny Professor Flitwick outline what they would be doing for the year. Normally Charms was the most fun class Harry had, but compared to today's first lesson with Mars, it seemed dull.

When Flitwick finished his outline, he asked if there were any questions. Terry Boot raised his hand and Flitwick called on him.

“Professor, will we be learning the Displacement Charm this year?” he asked.

“Oh no, no, we wouldn't teach that at Hogwarts. It is a very unwieldy spell, really

useful only for moving large objects haphazardly out of your way, Mr. Boot,” answered Flitwick.

“But in our Defense Against the Dark Arts class today, Mars moved things around very nimbly with it,” Padma spoke up. Parvati and Lavender both nodded agreement.

“My dear Miss Patil, I think you will find that Professor Mars' use of spells is often unorthodox. He's quite unique. There's really no need to learn that charm, yes, we have plenty of lessons for the year.” Flitwick then dismissed them without assigning homework, so everyone was happy as they made their way to lunch.

Ginny was already at the Gryffindor table, looked cross. Once they were seated, Hermione asked her what was wrong.

“I just had Potions with Snape. He heard Colin and I talking about what a great class we had with Mars, and I thought he was going to hit me right there,” answered Ginny.

“He threatened you?” asked Ron angrily.

“No, he just gave me this murderous look. I really thought he was going to curse me. Then he kept muttering horrible things about Mars every time he walked by me and Colin while we were mixing our potions,” said Ginny.

“Still don't think he's the spy, Hermione?” Ron asked nastily.

“Mars told us that they've always disliked each other. Plus, you now have to add in the fact that Mars was hired for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position – something that Snape has wanted for 6 years! It's hardly surprising that he's mad at Mars,” Hermione said stuffily.

“It looked a lot worse than just being mad to me, Hermione,” replied Ginny.

Harry had Double Care of Magical creatures after lunch; he noticed six Gryffindors and four Hufflepuffs in the class, and also two Slytherin sixth years: Sally-Anne Perks and Blaise Zabini. He saw no Ravenclaws. “Are there just three Houses in this class?”

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he wondered aloud.

“Nah, this is all the houses,” said Hagrid sadly, walking up to the group of students. “Just no Ravenclaws signed up for the NEWT level classes this year, Harry. None of 'em like me classes, they said.”

“That's a bit rude,” said Hermione.

“Rubbish sense of humor, Hagrid; pay them no mind,” suggested Harry.

“We've seen too much of those bookworms already, Hagrid. We're glad they're not in the class,” added Ron; this remark earned him a nasty look from Hermione.

The three of them had no time to chat with Hagrid after class, because Harry had to meet Mars at six, so all three rushed to the Hall for dinner.

When Harry had finished his dinner, he said goodbye to his friends and headed for Mars' office. He knocked lightly on the door and heard a deep voice bark, “Come in.” Harry opened the door and walked in.

He had been in this office while it was occupied by the previous four teachers, so he was quite familiar with it, or at least he thought he was. Harry's jaw dropped as he gaped around the room. The office was at least four times bigger than he remembered, and had two doors on one of the side walls that he knew had not been there just last year.

The back wall was covered in crossed spears with a shield beneath each set. The front wall had alternating pairs of crossed staffs and swords. All of the weapons looked well crafted and very expensive. The floor had an enormous Santa Fe rug in the middle, and the left back corner of the room sported a marble fountain of a wolf with water pouring out of its mouth.

“You trying to catch flies, Harry?” asked Mars, looking at Harry's open mouth.

Harry closed his jaws and recovered himself enough to speak. “You did a lot of redecorating, I see.”

“I had to, bud. Umbridge's decorations were uglier than she was; plus, I need a lot

of room. Who ever heard of a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher without a separate lab in his office?" answered Mars. "Come on over and sit at the desk; we have some very important matters to discuss."

They walked to a huge, simple-looking wooden desk near the back wall, close to the greatly-enlarged fireplace. Harry looked into the fireplace as he sat down, but jumped up in surprise when he saw two eyes staring at him from the middle of the flames.

"Mars! I saw eyes in the fireplace!" exclaimed Harry, pointing.

"Oh, don't concern yourself, Harry. It's just a Heliopath I use to guard my fireplace. I have it sealed off from the regular Floo network, of course, but you can never be too careful. He'll let people leave from this fireplace, but not arrive."

"Hermione said they don't exist."

"Who you gonna believe? Your eyes or some book she's read?"

The eyes in the fire blinked and Harry was positive he wasn't hallucinating, so he decided that Hermione must have been misinformed.

"The reason I asked you here tonight, Harry, is to discuss your assignments in my class. You have great raw talent, but it needs refining. From what I've seen during your Occlumency lessons and what I hear from others, you really progressed in your control from the teachings you gave the other students in your DA club."

"Yeah, it made me think hard about the spells I was showing them. I wanted to make sure I presented the best example. I mean, otherwise, I'd look like a prat, right?"

"Exactly, and that's why I'm going to separate you from all the others in my class. Even though your class is the most advanced one, you're even further ahead. Defense Against the Darks Arts, for you, Harry, is not a matter of marks or certificates, but a life and death struggle. I'll have a different curriculum for you, and I want you to do something very special."

"What?"

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“I have two first year classes and I want you to teach one of them each week in my place.”

“What? Be a real teacher? Mars, that's a lot different than being the leader of a club. I mean, I don't think I could manage,” replied Harry in a panicky voice.

“Come off it, Harry. Do you really think for a second you're not better than Quirrel, Lockheart or Umbridge?”

“Of course I am!” answered Harry automatically.

“Then there's no reason to be scared. I already have the lesson plans drawn out; if you think we should cover anything else, just let me know and we can add it to both classes. We'll have you start next week. You'll have a double period Wednesday morning, and then a single on Friday after break.”

Mars was again using that tone that suggested he expected obedience, but Harry still wasn't sure he was hearing correctly. Mars wanted him to teach a real class? He was still in school, for heavens sake! Would the parents complain? “Mars, are you sure this is allowed?”

“Relax, Harry. You've survived four separate attacks from Voldemort, for Pete's sake; even I haven't done that.” Mars picked up a notebook from his desk and handed it to Harry. “This is your lesson plan. Go ahead and study it so you're prepared for next week. I will be working you very hard this year, but it's necessary; you must believe me.”

Harry was too stunned to say anything; he simply shook Mars' outstretched hand and headed back for the Gryffindor common room. He was now a teacher, he thought; but it still hadn't sunk in. Would he make his students call him Professor Potter? He thought that had a nice ring to it.

His friends were surprised when he told them the news. They were also quite proud of him, though Ron worried that the extra workload would distract him from Quidditch practice. Hermione immediately wanted to look through his new lesson plan, and Ginny

simply beamed at him, full of pride. Buoyed by the confidence his friends showed in him, Harry began to think that he could pull off teaching a class. For now, however, they had other work to do.

Hermione couldn't wait to begin practicing the Spirit Slap jinx. By the time they all had mastered the spell, everyone was quite tired, and they bid each other good night.

Harry's second day of class also had a couple of surprises, but neither were good ones. In Astronomy lecture, all four houses were in the class, and that included Malfoy. To make matters worse, Crabbe and Goyle had somehow managed to get into the Astronomy NEWT program with him.

“How did those two idiots pass their OWLs? That is definitely dodgey,” snarled Hermione.

Her mood turned even more sour when the class began and Professor Sinistra again singled out Harry and Ron for praise about their Outstanding OWL results. The lecture on Astronomy, however, was so boring that by the the time it ended, Harry and Ron were both sore at Mars for talking them into keeping the subject. They ended up with a lot of star-charting homework, but that actually cheered them up, as they now had an excuse to use Harry's Galaxy Globe.

They got out of Astronomy a little early and waited outside the Transfiguration classroom. After a few minutes they saw Ginny and Luna leaving. Ginny warned them that one of the students had really riled up McGonagall and that they had all received a lot of homework because of this. Apparently McGonagall was still in a foul mood, as she snapped at them to hurry to their seats, even though they had just been allowed into the room.

“Now that you are finally ready, I will start with an admonition. We will be doing some very serious magic this year, and any fooling around in my class will not be tolerated. You have been warned.”

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McGonagall outlined what they would be doing for the year, just as Flitwick had. The serious magic she had referred to was the human transfiguration lessons that were planned near the term's end. Apparently things could go disastrously wrong. McGonagall did not, however, follow Flitwick's lead on homework; she assigned them many pages to read.

After break, the trio had their first Potions lesson of the year. Harry had been prepared to deal with Snape's normal loathing, but it seemed that Snape now hated Harry and Ron ten times more than before.

"I have no idea how you and your sidekick Weasley got into this class, Potter, but rest assured I will find out what you did," Snape sneered at the three of them. He spoke loudly enough for the whole class to hear his taunt.

"They're in the NEWT program for the same reason the rest of us are, Professor," said Hermione in their defense. "They earned an Outstanding on their Potions OWLs."

"No one asked you to speak, Miss Granger. Take your seat! Not you two. I'm not finished with you," hissed Snape through his yellow teeth.

Hermione stomped off to a free table.

"Professor, we couldn't have cheated on the exams. They were —" Ron started.

"Silence, Weasley!" Snape interrupted. "I was willing to let our problems fade into the past, to try and forget all of your transgressions, but no, that's not good enough for the dynamic duo, is it? The famous Potter now wants to follow in the footsteps of his new-found renegade friend Mars by disrupting my classes, along with his own set of Weasley sycophants," said Snape venomously. Ron and Harry both glared at him. "Any distractions from the two of you will not be tolerated. I'll be keeping a very close eye on you. It will be surprising indeed if either of you managed to stay in this class, or even Hogwarts itself. Now take your seats."

Harry was fuming as he sat down beside Hermione. Snape was telling him off for

doing well on his exam? What was he supposed to do, fail it? Probably, thought Harry. Snape had been trying to get Ron and him expelled for years.

Through the entire class Harry fought to contain his anger. Malfoy made faces at him, and Snape flashed him deadly looks. By the end of the class, Harry was ready to burst; he rushed out of the classroom as fast as he could. Ron and Hermione didn't catch up to him until the Entrance Hall.

"I can't believe Snape said those things to you. Accusing you of cheating when he knows that's impossible on the OWLs, and then he insulted Ron and his family. That was vile and despicable! You should tell Dumbledore straight away; I swear he was threatening to purposely get you expelled," fumed Hermione.

"No, Hermione, we should tell *Mars* straight away," Ron said darkly. "He might actually do something. Snape has been treating us like that ever since we got here."

Harry was about to voice his agreement when he heard a nasal female voice behind them.

"Running down Professors in front of other students, are you, Granger?" asked a tall, mean-looking, red-headed Slytherin girl whom Harry at once recognized as the Head Girl, Ester Spikes.

"What do you mean, Ester?" Hermione challenged.

"I heard what you called Professor Snape. 'Vile and despicable,' you said he was. Hardly the way you'd expect a prefect to act, is it? No, this will not do, Granger. I think three days of detention might teach you some respect. I'll also be reporting your insults to Professor McGonagall. See me after dinner for the details of your detention. Good day," replied Ester, and she walked into the Great Hall with the other students headed for lunch.

Hermione shook with fury. She gripped her hands into fists so tight that her knuckles turned white. "She's not going to get away with this," Hermione hissed with hatred.

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Ron nudged her forward. "C'mon, let's get moving."

Hermione reluctantly moved along with the boys to the Gryffindor table. Hermione was too upset to eat; she just sat at the table and fumed all through lunch.

Harry and Ron had the rest of the day off, so after lunch they went the library to do their Transfiguration and Potions homework, while Hermione went to Ancient Runes. Later that night, in the common room, Hermione told Ginny about her detention.

"I'll be mopping floors with Filch for three nights. Hardly pleasant, but it could have been much worse," she said, looking at the backs of Harry's hands.

"Ron was right, Hermione; we should tell Mars. I don't think Snape would be so arrogant and nasty to his face," suggested Ginny.

"Snape was pretty nasty to him at the Order's meeting, remember?" said Harry.

"I don't think Snape feels so confident without Kingsley around, but it doesn't matter. I'm not saying anything to Mars, and neither should any of you," said Hermione firmly.

"Why not?"

"Because I think Mars would take it badly and respond very forcefully."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Ron.

"Do you want him getting banished again? I certainly don't. He could be one of the best Teachers we've ever had," answered Hermione. She went back to reading her Runes book.

Harry went to bed that night thinking only of how much he hated Severus Snape.

The end of the first week was about the same as the beginning. Defense Against the Dark Arts was the most enjoyable class, and Potions was the worst. The professors were piling the homework on them, and all the while Harry had to prepare for teaching the first years starting on Wednesday. He couldn't remember a previous first week with so little free time.

Hermione served her first detention Thursday night. By eight o'clock on the next night, Harry, Ron and Ginny had finished enough of their homework to stop for the evening and were thinking of playing exploding snap when Hermione unexpectedly joined them in the Common Room.

"I thought you were in detention?" asked Ron.

"Well, I was working with Filch in the Charms corridor when Mars came by and wanted to know why I was mopping when I had plenty of homework. I explained that I had detention and how I got it. He seemed amused," said Hermione with a slight frown. "But then he said that I didn't have to serve any more of the punishment and to enjoy the weekend."

"Wow," said Ron and Ginny.

"I bet that hacked off Filch," said Harry.

"He did look upset, but he also seemed terrified of Mars. So I decided to leave while I was ahead," she shrugged.

Hermione wasn't interested in any games, so she worked on her Runes and Arithmancy homework the rest of the night while the boys and Ginny played snaps.

When he awoke on Saturday morning, Harry had his plans for the day already in place. After breakfast he would finish his Astronomy homework using his globe; he and Ron had placed it in the Gryffindor common room for everyone to use. Afterward, he would get totally prepared for his first teaching assignment. Harry had promised himself not to get behind in his studies this year, and he didn't want to let down Mars by looking daft on his first day as a teacher.

When he arrived in the Great Hall, Ron, Hermione and Neville were having breakfast together while Ginny chatted with Katie Bell and Jack Sloper. Harry sat down next to Neville and grabbed some toast.

"You know what we've got to do today, mate?" asked Ron.

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“Finish our mountain of Astronomy homework?” answered Harry.

Hermione nodded, but Ron wrinkled his nose. “Besides the ruddy homework, I mean! We have to arrange for the Quidditch team trials next week. And – um – pick a new captain,” said Ron, averting his eyes.

“Oh, I'd forgotten about needing a new chaser and a captain,” said Harry, embarrassed.

“Well, we haven't,” said Ginny, standing behind Harry with Katie Bell. They both stared down at him.

Katie crossed her arms and looked across the table at Andrew Kirke, who had just walked up behind Ron and Hermione. Then she spoke. “Well, as the only seventh year on the team, I expect my opinion to be respected, and from talking to Ginny I have an opinion on who should be our new captain now that Angelina has left.”

Everyone looked at Katie with bated breath.

“It seems that Ron here has drawn up many well-thought-out plays over the summer, and has become quite possessed, like Oliver and Angelina were, so I think that makes him the natural choice. Do you lot agree?” she asked.

Ron choked on his pumpkin juice, but Harry, Ginny and Jack agreed loudly and enthusiastically. Andrew looked at Ron and then nodded.

“Then it's decided. Congratulations, Ron!” said Katie, clapping politely with the others. “At three o'clock today, we meet in Madam Hooch's office with Professor McGonagall to discuss the trials and officially name our Captain.”

Katie and the others left; Ginny sat down next to Harry. Harry and Ginny fussed over Ron throughout breakfast; Hermione, however, seemed rather subdued. After a few minutes, Ginny left to write a letter to their parents and the twins.

When they finished breakfast, the trio headed back to the Common Room to start their Astronomy homework. As they climbed the last staircase before the Fat Lady,

Hermione turned to Ron and spoke.

“Ron, do you think it's a good idea for you to be the Quidditch Captain?”

Ron looked confused and then angry. “Are you saying I'm not good enough to be Captain?”

“No, I didn't say that!” she answered quickly.

“Then just what are you saying?”

“It's just that with all the NEWT level classes we have and your prefect duties, do you really think you have time to be captain?”

Ron looked furious. “Nothing I do is ever good enough for you, is it?” Hermione started to object, but Ron talked over her. “When I make prefect, you think it must be a mistake, then you're mad at me for doing well on my OWLs, and now I get offered the captaincy, something I've always dreamed of, and you want me to refuse it? What's the matter, Hermione, do you think if I stop being such a nobody I won't be as much fun to look down upon?”

Hermione looked hurt; her eyes swelled with tears. She managed to say, “Ron, I don't think you're a nobody. How –”

“Then why do you treat me like one?” yelled Ron. He stormed up the stairs and through the Fat Lady's painting.

Hermione wiped a few tears away from her eyes and looked at Harry. Sniffling, she asked, “Does he really think I look down upon him?”

“He didn't sound to me like he was joking,” answered Harry cautiously.

“Ron must know that's not true!”

Harry knew what he should do and say, but he was scared to try. After a pause that seemed to last years, he pushed himself into action. He put his arm around Hermione and forced the words out of his mouth.

“Ron's just not sure that you like him, Hermione.”

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“What?” she snapped. “That's ridiculous, Harry. If I didn't like him why would I spend so much time around him?”

“No, Hermione, I mean,” and now Harry had to struggle hard to make himself finish, “*like* him. Different than you like me or Neville. You know.”

Harry could not believe how stupid he sounded; he was positive that Hermione going to laugh in his face. Instead, she gave him a puzzled look. “You mean like going out?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure he wants me to like him like that?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“Then he's got a funny way of showing it. He didn't even notice that I *was* a girl for the first three and a half years he knew me. Even after this revelation, he never asked me out, or got me a Valentine's Day card, and he didn't want to dance with me at his own brother's wedding, even after all my hints!” Hermione began crying as she spoke. “He only did in the end b-because Tonks, Fleur and M-Mars tricked him!” She cried harder now and her face grew red.

This was not going at all the way Harry had planned. He needed to say something fast in Ron's defense, so Hermione would know Ron was just being daft and not purposely mean. Harry could only think of the way that he had felt at the wedding, how happy he was once he had been dancing with Ginny and how nervous he had been beforehand.

“Hermione, he didn't ask you to dance because he was nervous.”

“That's rubbish Harry,” she said tearfully. “He's known me for years, he's –”

“He was nervous because, well, you know how clumsy he is. Plus, he doesn't know how to dance. He didn't want to embarrass himself in front of all those graceful French people and Ministry officials. And ... and he really wanted to make Mars think he was

cool."

Harry stopped himself before he exposed too many of his own feelings. He remembered how happy Ron and Hermione looked as they danced, and knew exactly how to end his little white lie (if, in fact, it was a lie). He grabbed Hermione by the shoulders, and pulled her head up until she was looking at his face.

"Ron also told me that dancing with you was the best feeling he had ever had. Better than winning the Quidditch Cup, but he ... he," Harry instantly knew he had gone way overboard! He had to end this quick and cover his tracks. "Didn't know how to tell you. In fact, if he ever knew that I told you what he said, he'd never forgive me. You understand, don't you?" Harry crossed his fingers behind Hermione's back and hoped she'd say yes.

Hermione sniffled again and then smiled at Harry. "Yes, I understand. Thank you, Harry." She threw her arms around Harry and hugged him. "Oh Harry, thank you for telling me that. I won't let on, I promise." She let go of him. "I just wish boys weren't so stupid about their feelings."

"Like you lot are so easy to understand," retorted Harry.

She smiled at him again and they walked up to the Common Room together.

Fortunately Ron's sour mood passed quickly and the three of them worked on their Astronomy homework through lunch, up until Harry, Ginny and Ron had to leave for the quidditch meeting.

The meeting went well, although Ron seemed nervous about speaking to everyone in the role of leader. They were to have trials, similar to last year's, on Friday after class; they would decide on a practice schedule once they'd picked a new chaser.

When they got back to the Common Room, Harry had a difficult time getting away from Ron and his quidditch talk – he needed to prepare himself for his first teaching assignment. Eventually he got Ron to leave him alone to study properly.

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The first lesson was to be about wand care and safety; Harry chuckled as he remembered hearing Mad-Eye complain that basic wand safety was never taught anymore. It would also cover proper stance when casting defensive spells and wand grip techniques.

Normally this would all have seemed boring to Harry, but he realized that he had learned these things on his own, through experience. It seemed like something that should have been taught him right away, and he looked forward to teaching it to the first years. He already had several snappy comebacks ready for when the students complained about not learning spells first. He suddenly realized that he was thinking like a teacher.

Harry was so busy that Wednesday morning was upon him before he knew it. He was nervous at breakfast, and it must have shown.

“Harry don't worry, you were brilliant teaching all of us last year. This should be easy,” said Ginny.

“She's right, Harry; plus, you have a lesson plan to work with. Last year, you had to do it on your own,” added Hermione.

“You're gonna do fine, mate!” said Ron brightly.

“I know it should be easier than last year, but now I have to worry about Mars being satisfied with how I do. You know how demanding he is,” said Harry softly.

They all agreed with this. Mars had not been exaggerating when he claimed his class would be as hard as any other three combined. He expected perfect and speedy execution, and was not hesitant to call you out when he knew you weren't giving your best effort. Quite a few others had felt the jolt of Mars' Stinging Charm as Harry had on the first day. You had to be on your toes every minute in Defense Against the Dark Arts. The class was still, however, everyone's favorite by far.

After breakfast the four of them split up. Ron had the morning off, so he was going to catch up on his prefect duties. Ginny had Care of Magical Creatures, Hermione had

Herbology, and Harry, of course, headed to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

When he reached the classroom the students were in two queues, one Gryffindor and one Slytherin. Harry sighed. Mars had, of course, told him which houses were going to be in his class, but it still didn't make it easy to be civil to Slytherins.

Harry walked by the lines and opened the door to the classroom. He saw Mars sitting on an edge of the desk, and smiled at him. He turned and told the pupils to come in and be seated; then he walked up to Mars.

“Well, everyone, as you know, Harry Potter will be your teacher for the remainder of the year. He will be the one handing out marks, so you better make sure you treat him just like any other Professor. I'll stop by to help him in some exercises from time to time, but otherwise you won't be seeing me in this class. You can always come by my office to visit me, though. Any questions before I leave?” Mars asked the class.

Heather Parkinson's hand shot up and Mars called on her.

“Mars, should we refer to him as Professor Potter?” she asked.

“Well, Heather, that's up to him,” answered Mars, shifting his gaze to Harry.

Harry had quite liked the ring of Professor Potter, but then he realized that the first year Gryffindors already called him Harry. He couldn't have half the kids calling him by a different name.

“Harry will do, Heather. Hopefully I don't need a title to have your respect.”

Mars patted him on the shoulder and left.

Harry tried to make sure his hands weren't shaking as he took out his register and called out the names of the students. Most of them looked eager as they answered the roll, especially Mark Evans and Heather Parkinson. One poor blond Gryffindor girl named Mary was so nervous that when Harry called her name she knocked two of her ink bottles crashing to the floor. Harry smiled and remembered Ginny acting the same when she was eleven.

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As soon as Harry began actually instructing his pupils, his anxiety faded and his instincts took over. Only a few of the Slytherins complained when he explained that it would be a few lessons before they learned spells. Harry's own stance and grip were very close to the ones that Mars wanted taught to the first years, so everything felt very natural as he led the class through the motions.

All in all, Harry thought the first class came off quite well. The students seemed very interested, but a few looked bored when Harry lectured them on wand safety. He wasn't going to hold it against them, though; it was also pretty boring to him. When he dismissed the class he was surprised to see almost a quarter of the students approach him, half of them Slytherins.

"It's great having you as a teacher, Harry. How lucky are we to be learning from such a famous wizard!" Mark Evans blurted excitedly.

Mary, next to Mark, asked Harry to autograph her textbook.

Most of the crowd just wanted to shake his hand and say hi, but Heather Parkinson, along with two other Slytherin girls, Renee Allen and Sarah Harrick, and one Slytherin boy, Gary Lovel, hung around. After the other students had gone the four walked up to Harry.

"Harry." Heather paused and looked around the room nervously. "You were really good. The older Slytherins said you would be mean to us, and they said you were – well – they said some rather nasty things actually."

The others nodded nervously in agreement.

Harry was surprised—not that the Slytherins were libeling him, but that these four first years had not only told him about it, but seemed upset by it.

"Well I'm not very popular with your house, or its Head," replied Harry.

"A few of them even wanted us to disrupt your class," confessed Heather. "But how could we ever do that after Mars told us last week how important it is that we stick

together?”

“Mars said that to your class?” asked Harry.

“Yes. He made us all, Gryffindors and Slytherins, promise to try and be friends and that if anyone gives us a hard time about it to see him,” answered Heather.

“We're not all like that git Draco, Harry,” insisted Gary.

“Or like Ester!” added Renee.

“Or even my sister Pansy, Harry,” said Heather apologetically. “I can't believe how mean she is now. She was never like that at home.”

Harry had always considered all Slytherin students to be pretty much clones of Malfoy or Pansy. He had never entertained the idea that some of them could be different, but just too afraid to speak up. This annoyed him, because he had always thought himself above that sort of bigotry.

“I promise to treat all my students fairly, Heather. There's no reason why we can't be friends,” said Harry.

They all beamed at him and left his classroom. So this is what it's like to be a teacher, he thought. Not too bad, really. Then Harry left to meet his friends in the courtyard during break.

Chapter Thirteen – Old Friends



Between Quidditch practice and schoolwork, Harry had been so busy that an entire month had passed before he knew it. He was at breakfast early one Monday morning and Hermione was in the midst of her yearly nag that he and Ron should start making their study schedules.

“Hermione, it's ages till the exams, and it's not like we aren't already working our noses to the grindstone,” retorted Ron.

“You said the same thing last year, and you still put off your revising,” lectured Hermione.

“Well I think getting nine OWLs apiece speaks for itself, don't you, Harry?”

Harry simply nodded. He agreed with Ron, but had no wish to be dragged into this argument.

“But I still had to make the schedules for you again. I was just hoping this year the two of you would be a bit more responsible.”

As Harry feared, their sniping match was just beginning, and it lasted all the way through breakfast and their walk to Defense Against the Dark Arts. Harry walked apart from the quarreling pair and chatted with Ginny and Neville. When they arrived, Mars seemed eager to get the class started; he shut the hall door as soon as the last student had entered.

“Today, you're going to learn a charm that has not been taught at Hogwarts for centuries. The teachers think it's too troublesome for students to know, and the Ministry frowns upon its use outside of law enforcement,” said Mars.

This remark whetted the appetite of the class and they made enthusiastic noises. Mars waved his wand at the board and the words “Whisper Charm” appeared on it. Only Hermione and Padma appeared to have even heard of the spell, and even they weren't sure what it did or how to cast it.

“Let me show y'all an example. Hmmm, what would make a good juicy message?” wondered Mars as his eyes roamed over the students. His gaze stopped at Ginny and Luna and he smiled broadly at them. “Oh yes, perfect.” He pointed his wand at his mouth, said “Oratio Clandestinus,” and moved it quickly to point in Harry's direction. His lips then moved as if he was saying something, but no sound emerged.

A small breeze out of nowhere moved Harry, Ron and Hermione's hair, and they heard Mars' voice whisper, “Harry, when are you going to come to your senses and ask Ginny out?”

Harry jumped, stunned speechless. Mars chuckled at the front of the class, and Harry heard Ron chortling behind him. Ron shoved him in the back; Hermione struggled

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to control a giggling fit.

“As you can see, only the people whom I wished to hear my message, did. In stealth and battle-field conditions, this little spell can be immensely helpful. It however can certainly get on a teacher's nerves if his students are chatting with this charm instead of paying attention in class,” said Mars, gazing pointedly at Padma, Parvati and Lavender. They giggled nervously.

The rest of the class was spent practicing this spell. Harry was still annoyed at Mars for sending that message about Ginny so that Hermione and Ron could hear. He had quite started to like Ginny, but the last thing he needed was to be ribbed about it. Each time Harry started to make headway in learning the charm, Ron or Hermione would look at him and start laughing again.

Harry was not the only one who was having trouble with the spell. After fifty minutes or so Seamus complained that he just couldn't get it to work.

Mars must have heard Seamus complain, because he spoke to the class. “Okay, hands up who has managed to cast the spell,” he ordered.

A little more than half of the class raised their hands; Harry noticed that virtually all of them were girls.

“Tsk, ts; just as I feared. Boys, this spell could one day save your life or that of a friend. I wouldn't risk the ire of all the other teachers just to show you a gossip spell. Just because the spell doesn't zap or pulverize something, doesn't make it useless for Defense Against the Dark Arts. I want all of you to have mastered this charm by Friday. No exceptions,” he finished, staring right at Seamus. Mars dismissed the class.

Many of the girls in the class stopped by the teacher's desk, chatting excitedly. Harry, however, was still miffed at Mars; he headed straight for the door. On the way out, he heard Ginny and Katie asking Mars what message had made Harry blush so much. Harry scowled and hurried out before he could hear Mars' reply.

Hermione and Ron caught up with him in the courtyard. They both tried unsuccessfully to hide their amusement, which irritated Harry further.

“Why does he always do that stuff to me?” asked Harry, annoyed.

“It's just a joke, mate. What happened to your sense of humor?” answered Ron.

“It might've been funny if he hadn't let you two in on it.”

“Oh, come off it, Harry, he picks on everyone, you know. Besides, he's got a point about Ginny. You're always looking at her like you're interested – you shouldn't be leading her on if you don't plan on asking her out,” said Hermione.

Harry was about to object strenuously but a cold, drawling voice rang out first.

“Potter, this is pathetic even for you. Taking romantic advice from a bucktoothed muggle?”

Draco Malfoy and his two flunkies, Crabbe and Goyle, stepped around a pillar that had obscured them from sight.

“Shut it, Malfoy,” spat Harry.

“Hermione's a witch!” snarled Ron.

“I mean, what kind of disgraceful wizard would it take to even think about dating this bushy-haired, loud-mouthed mudblood anyway?” Malfoy stared straight at Ron.

Ron looked livid and Harry was sure that he and Malfoy were about to go for their wands, but again a drawling voice rang out. This one was much deeper, and had a Texas twang.

“Draco, what did I hear you call my student?” asked Mars who had just walked up to Harry and Ron and then passed in front of them.

Malfoy looked up at Mars with malice in his eyes that quickly changed to fear. Harry couldn't see Mars' eyes, but he would have bet his Firebolt that they were blazing. Malfoy looked terrified, but couldn't seem to avert his eyes.

“Answer me, Draco. There's no point in trying to lie to me, boy,” Mars said

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sharply.

Malfoy stammered a bit and then said, shakily but clearly, “I-I called her a mudblood.”

Harry and the others were startled at this self-incrimination. Malfoy wasn't crazy enough to think he could use bravado with Mars, was he?

Mars reached a hand down to his belt, to a small leather pouch that he kept there; his other hand pointed an index finger at Malfoy's chest.

“If I ever hear you call one of my students that again, I'll knock your head right off your shoulders, boy. And don't you take this warning as just a figure of speech, either.” Mars seemed to be pulling something out of the pouch as he spoke.

“Am I right in thinking that you three will soon be seventeen? Within a couple of months, isn't it?” asked Mars in a deadly calm voice.

Crabbe, Goyle and Malfoy all nodded nervously.

“That means you'll be allowed to move up from the junior auxiliary and become full-fledged Death Eaters. Well, I'm sure your parents will be proud, but let me show you where being a Donnie will take you.”

Mars' left hand quickly moved out in front of him, holding something that had been taken from the pouch; Harry hadn't gotten a good look at it.

“This look familiar, Vincent?” he asked.

Goyle and Malfoy stared at the unknown object cluelessly, but Crabbe's eyes glinted with recognition. His face flushed with anger and he seemed so upset that Harry thought he might actually attack Mars.

“*This* is where you three are headed if you don't change direction 180 degrees. I warn you, there is very little time left to save yourselves,” said Mars, glowering at Crabbe.

Under Mars' stare, Crabbe's fury transformed into terror. His face contorted and he

screamed. “NOOOOOOOOOOoooooooooooo!” He spun and sprinted towards the entrance doors, yelling gibberish. Malfoy and Goyle looked confused, but they were trembling.

“Get after him. Make sure he tells you why he ran off. Go on, beat it!” Mars waved his other hand at them.

Malfoy and Goyle darted after their friend in silence.

“W-why did Crabbe scream like that, Mars?” whispered Hermione, scared.

Slowly Mars turned, and when they saw his eyes all three flinched. None of Mars' usual warmth was present. Pure and simple malice seemed to ooze from his gaze. All around them the air tingled with electricity, causing their hair to stand on end. Power seemed to radiate from Mars, and the sight of him was terrifying.

“He recognized *this*, and deduced how it fell into my possession,” answered Mars. The malice faded and the eerie tingling of the air stopped as he showed the three of them the unfamiliar wand in his hand.

“But why would a wand scare him like that?” asked Ron, who had recovered first from the sight of Mars' rage.

“Because it was his father's,” answered Mars.

He turned to Harry. “I followed you out here because it seemed you were really upset with the teasing I gave you, Harry. It's just good natured, but there was some advice embedded in the joke.”

Harry was still pondering the significance of Mars having Crabbe's father's wand. He replied to Mars without thinking. “Oh, no probs, Mars. I can take it.”

Mars smiled at him. “I should have known. A little teasing is nothing compared to what you've been through.” He shifted his gaze to Hermione. “Hermione darlin', don't you let that lowlife Draco Malfoy bother you. I have known many a great witch who was muggleborn. Draco and his family will soon get what's coming to them.” He turned and

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walked back towards his classroom.

All three were lost in their thoughts for a minute or so until Ron reminded them it was time to go to Charms. They were sufficiently distracted by these events that even Hermione paid Professor Flitwick scant attention. Flitwick noticed, and for the first time Harry could remember, Hermione, along with Ron and himself, was given extra homework before the class was dismissed for lunch.

They were eating at the Gryffindor table before Hermione openly broached the subject of Mars and Crabbe.

“Mars was out of order, threatening them like that,” she stated.

“Threatening them?” replied Ron incredulously “He was warning them, Hermione. He was a lot nicer than I was about to be.”

“Who was threatening who?” asked Ginny, sitting down next to Hermione.

Hermione quickly filled Ginny in. Ginny looked shocked. “You know how Mars got Crabbe's wand, don't you?” Ginny said.

“What do you mean?” asked Ron.

“He must have been the one that killed him,” said Harry.

“I don't follow you two,” said Hermione.

“In wartime, American wizards take trophies from their defeated opponents. Luna told me about it,” said Ginny.

“And I saw Mars take the wands from the wizards that attacked me in the alleyway this summer. I never thought about it until now,” added Harry.

“That's just sick!” said Hermione, aghast. “How could someone even think of taunting someone with the death of their parent? It's even worse than that, if it was Mars that killed his father.”

“Like Ron said, Hermione, Mars was warning him. He's giving Crabbe and those other two gits one last chance to straighten up before they become Death Eaters and

therefore his enemies. I don't remember Snape or even Dumbledore doing that. It's probably the nicest thing a teacher has ever done for them,” said a fiercely loyal Harry.

“You have an odd definition of nicest, Harry,” retorted Hermione.

“You pick odd people to defend, Hermione,” growled Harry.

Ron and Ginny agreed with Harry; that annoyed Hermione so much that she simply answered “Fine!” and stuck her nose in a book for the rest of lunch.

After lunch, the sixth years headed out to Hagrid's cabin for class. When they arrived, Hagrid was talking to the two Slytherin girls in the class. They were looking into a cage as they spoke; when they noticed Harry, Ron and Hermione approaching, all three greeted them brightly.

Ron and Hermione were taken aback by this friendly greeting from Slytherins, but Harry had been told by several of his first year students that Sally-Anne and Blaise were both nice girls who had been bullied into acting unfriendly by the other Slytherins, especially Pansy Parkinson and Malfoy. Not all of Harry's Slytherin students were friendly towards him, but a little more than half were, and they had changed his outlook considerably. Harry quickly returned the girls' salutation. “All right, you lot! What's in the cage?”

Hermione and Ron mumbled a surprised greeting of their own.

“They're mokes, Harry; I'll explain more once the rest o' the class gets here,” answered Hagrid. The three looked into the cage, which was full of small tree branches and leaves; on one of the larger branches were four silver-green lizards sunning themselves.

Within a few minutes the Hufflepuffs and the rest of the Gryffindors had arrived, and Hagrid started his lecture.

“Now, these lizards might look all non-magical to yeh, but I can tell yeh that yeh'll work as hard ter catch one as yeh would a unicorn,” he said, seeming proud that he had

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managed this feat.

“How can that be, Hagrid?” asked Hannah Abbot.

“Just yeh watch and see,” he answered, and poked a stick into the cage. As the stick neared one of the mokes, the lizard shrank from about eight inches to around a quarter of an inch, and quickly hid under a leaf. The class was impressed.

“Pretty easy ter see why muggles don't know about'em even though the mokes live all around'em. Wizards like ter make their wallets or money pouches out of moke skin because when a thief tries ter steal it they shrink just like the lizard,” Hagrid explained. He went on to describe where they live and how to tell them from ordinary lizards at a distance. They finished the class by making a drawing of the mokes and labeling their distinguishing marks.

When class was over, Hagrid invited Harry, Hermione and Ron over to his cabin for some tea before dinner. While they were drinking the tea, Ron brought up the friendliness of the two Slytherin girls in the class.

“What's with Sally-Anne Perkins and Blaise Zabini getting all friendly lately?”

“Yes, it has been a bit odd,” added Hermione. “They've both been saying hi to me, and a few of the first year Slytherins have been friendly too, especially, believe it or not, Pansy's little sister Heather.”

“Well, ter tell yeh the truth, Sally-Anne an' Blaise have always been nice ter me. They've always apologized for th' way some of the Sytherins spoke to me,” said Hagrid.

“I think they have always wanted to be friendly, but they weren't brave enough to talk to the other houses until Mars got here,” said Harry.

“What do you mean?” asked Hermione.

Harry explained to them what he had learned from his students about Mars making them be friends, and how more than half of his Slytherin kids were quite nice. He admitted to feeling guilty about prejudging them based on their house.

“I still don't get it, though,” admitted Ron. “You can't just tell someone they're going to be friends and expected it to happen can you?”

“Mars can be hard to say no to, Ron,” said Harry.

“Too right about that yeh are, Harry. When I firs' ran inter Mars since he got back a month or so ago, he was downright scary when I disagreed with'em,” said Hagrid, shivering a bit.

“What happened?” all three asked eagerly.

“Well, I was in Tomintoul, spying on the—, er, well, I was, um, taking, er, a hike—” sputtered Hagrid.

“Were you keeping an eye on the giants that the Death Eaters brought back to Britain?” asked Ron as Harry and Hermione grinned at Hagrid.

Hagrid looked surprised but then he just shook his enormous head. “Should've known, as nosy as yeh three are. One day that will do you in, yeh know? But, yeah, I was watchin' the giants. Grawpy came with me, an' we managed to secretly get a few ter join our side. The ones that seemed ter like me an' Olympe before.

“Then, about three days before the start of the term, out of nowhere I hear Mars say from righ' behind me, 'Howdy Hagrid, long time no see, eh, partner?' Me heart nearly stopped, I was so shocked. I hadn't seen Mars since Dumbledore had banished him when he was jus' eighteen an' then, BLAM, he jus' appears out of nowhere in me secret hidin' spot.”

Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged looks when Hagrid mentioned Mars' banishment. Harry was sure they were thinking the same thing he was – that Hagrid would prove to be a lot easier to get information out on the subject than Bill had been. The three of them sat back to let Hagrid finish his story while they plotted how to get him talk about the banishment.

“I asked 'im what I could do fer 'im, and mentioned that I was bit busy at the

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moment, but I don't think he listened to a word I said. He just wants to know when I was gonna be back at Hogwarts. I told 'im I hadn't really concerned meself about it, since I was on a real important mission that he was interrupting!

“Then he tells me that the term starts in three days an' that I had better get prepared to start teachin'. I was gettin' annoyed but I kept me temper; Mars was always really nice ter me when he was in school. I told him that Wilhelmina was all set ter cover me classes until I was finished. He jus' looked real cold at me an' said I was ter leave fer Hogwarts right away. He told me ter go find Grawpy an' that he was gonna send us back with a port key. I started t' object but then he turned a small boulder near us into a port key an' told me to get a move on it. I was really mad now. I said t'him that I was on a mission fer Dumbledore an' I wasn't goin' nowhere.”

“What did he say to that?” asked Harry.

“He just ignored me again. He said that I *had* ter be at Hogwarts when the train arrived, an' that his own people would keep on eye on the giants. Then I look him straight in th' eye an' I'm about ter really tell 'im off but I start feelin' weird. Like he's inside me brain, a bit like the dementors when they make you feel depressed, but he was makin' me feel weak. I was so weak I fell to me knees an' then he touches me arm an' fear spreads through my body – I've never been so scared in me life. I was shakin' an' then he tells me I must hurry an' get back t'Hogwarts. I was so terrified I just ran for the port key an' grabbed it. I didn't even have time ter think about poor Grawpy,” said Hagrid, who still looked quite shaken by relating the tale.

“What happened to Grawp then?” asked Hermione.

Hagrid swallowed a gulp of tea and said, “When I appeared at Hogwarts I looked around an' all the fear was gone. I had half a mind ter grab the port key an' go back fer Grawp, but then he appeared right next to me. Poor Grawpy couldn't explain how he had got there; another port key, I s'pose. Then I thought about using the port key to go back

an' finish m'argument with Mars, but I remembered how terrifyin' his eyes were. I then decided I never wanted to make that ruddy wizard mad at me again. No way will I even think about arguin' with 'im. Sommat spooky about 'im, I tell yeh. He must be okay though; Dumbledore sure likes 'im."

"I wonder why he was so determined for you to be back before the term started?" asked Hermione.

Harry and Ron looked at each other and realized they knew exactly why, but that it would be best to explain it to Hermione without Hagrid around.

"Has he mentioned anything about the incident since?" asked Harry.

"No, nothin'. He has been real nice an' friendly. He even patched things up with Magorian fer me. The centaurs are cordial again, an' they leave Grawpy alone. I'm not sore at Mars any more, but still really confused. Mars has always been a bit weird, but don't mention that I said that. I want ter stay on his good side," answered Hagrid.

"You mentioned Professor Dumbledore banishing Mars years ago. Charlie and Bill had told us about it, but not everything. Wouldn't it be hard to banish a wizard like Mars?" asked Hermione hopefully. Harry and Ron beamed at her.

"Well, they *were* his best mates, Hermione. I doubt I know more'n them," said Hagrid.

"But you are so close to Dumbledore; I mean, he trusts you more than anyone, right?" Hermione said quickly.

Hagrid chest swelled with pride. "Oh, all right, I did see a few things in person that Ron's brothers mighta missed." He got up to refill the kettle. Harry and Ron both flashed Hermione the thumbs up sign.

"Well, ter start off, you lot gotta know that Mars knew quite a few original members of th' Order of the Phoenix. He was way too young to be in it, even younger than you, but he was still furious when we wouldn't let 'im in," said Hagrid.

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“I know the feeling,” said Harry hotly.

“Even more'n you think Harry. You-Know-Who murdered Mars' mum almost exactly one year before he killed yehr parents,” said Hagrid sadly.

“No!” exclaimed Hermione. Harry was too unnerved to speak.

“Yeah, it was awful. He was just thirteen and saw You-Know-Who finish her off,” said Hagrid, sniffing.

Harry's mind raced. Mars really did know how he felt. He and Harry were both famous; they both seemed to be liked and outcast simultaneously by society; and both of them had lost their mums to Voldemort.

“You and Mars sure have a lot in common, Harry,” commented Ron. Harry nodded mutely.

Hagrid looked aghast. “Well, I don't about that, but what I was about ter say was that he knew your parents, Harry. Not well, but he met'em a few times.”

“Really?” said Harry.

“Yeah, but more important ter this story is someone else that he did know well.”

“Who?”

“Sirius Black,” said Hagrid plainly.

“Mars knew Sirius?” asked Harry and Ron together.

“Yep; Sirius always said we should've let Mars join up with us, 'specially after his mum was killed. That made Mars really look up to Sirius. Whenever he'd stop by ter see Dumbledore he would always make time to chat with young Mars.

“Well, as you can imagine, Mars was simply distraught when your parents were murdered, Harry. We all were, but he just couldn't accep' that Sirius'd betrayed them. Even with all the evidence an' Dumbledore's personal testimony Mars didn't believe Sirius was guilty,” explained Hagrid.

“But how could have he known?” asked Hermione.

“Yeah, even Dumbledore and Sirius' best friend Lupin believed he was guilty,” added Ron.

“I'm not sure exactly how he knew, but Mars claimed no one that evil coulda fooled him so many times. He said no one could look him in the eye and lie so convincingly,” said Hagrid.

“Malfoy sure couldn't; he 'fessed right up to Mars,” Harry pointed out.

“Well, Mars was fumin' because no one would listen to him. He raged at Dumbledore so bad I thought fer sure he was gonna get expelled. He even tried to force his way inter the Minister of Magic's office when she didn't answer the owls he sent her,” continued Hagrid.

“He did that when he was fifteen?” asked Hermione.

“Yeah, he and Millicent Bagnold never got along after that,” answered Hagrid.

“Well, what did Mars want them to do? Just set Sirius free? Until he saw that picture of Pedigrew sitting on Ron's shoulder, even Sirius didn't know how to prove his innocence. I mean the Wizengamot's not going to declare him innocent just because Mars doesn't think people can fool him,” said Hermione.

“He wanted 'em to give Sirius a chance to at least drink Veritaserum an' show he *could* be innocent. Mars said there were ways to fool that serum, but at least an inquiry could be started if he passed,” said Hagrid.

“Yes, that does make sense. I mean, once he passed the Veritaserum test, surely an excellent and trusted Legilimens could have verified his innocence! Oh, they should have listened to Mars,” said Hermione sadly.

Harry was keen to hear more of the story. “Go on, Hagrid,” he prompted.

“Well, Mars was never the same. Charlie told me he never saw Mars do any school work his las' three years, even though he got Outstandings on all of his OWLs and NEWTs. It was years before we found out what he was really studyin’,” said Hagrid.

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“Charlie told us he was learning about Hogwarts Castle's defenses,” said Harry.

“Not just the Hogwarts defenses, Harry; all protective wards, sensor charms and such,” replied Hagrid.

“What for?” asked Ron.

“I'm gettin' to that,” said Hagrid as he took another gulp of tea. Hagrid had grown more excited as his story unfolded. “When he lef' Hogwarts, Mars traveled a bunch. No one really knows where fer sure, but for a while he was in Egypt with your brother Bill, Ron. Dumbledore thought he musta been to South East Asia and Texas for a while also, but I didn't see him fer two years.

“One day me and Dumbledore were in Hogsmeade lookin' fer a birthday present for Professor McGonagall an' Mars jus' walks up out of nowhere like he always does. We were too surprised to say anythin' righ' away, but Mars did. He goes, 'Hi Hagrid, I just wanted to say I always liked you, buddy.' Then he turns to Dumbledore and says 'Old Man, I never thanked you for all you taught me and all you did for me. Sometimes it just takes a while to realize these things. I'm sorry that sometimes I seemed so ungrateful.' He shakes Dumbledore's hand an' I don't think I ever saw the Professor look more proud in his life. Mars then just turned, walked away a bit an' disappeared. I remember it all perfectly because it was the last time I saw him until he found me in Tomintoul last month,” said Hagrid and then he took another gulp of tea.

“After a few seconds we wen' inter the store that we were in front of and started lookin' fer presents again. Dumbledore looked like he was thinkin' hard an' after about fifteen minutes he jus' stops dead an' starts talking t' himself. 'I should have known immediately!' he says. Then he tells me ter get back t'Hogwarts righ' away. He then takes out his wand an' righ' before he disappears he says again t' himself. 'I have to beat him there, I just have to,’” said Hagrid.

“Beat him where?” asked Harry.

Hagrid took a deep breath and put his cup down. He gazed around the table at them and then said quietly, “Azkaban.”

Harry, Hermione, and Ron immediately started yelling questions at Hagrid.

“You're joking!”

“He went to break out Sirius?”

“But there were hundreds of dementors there!”

“He went to *talk* ter Sirius, an' he was right well ready for the dementors.

Dumbledore got there, but quite a few minutes behind Mars. He could tell at once that most of the wards had been countered. Dumbledore could also see that Mars was surrounded by dementors, but he noticed that there wasn't nearly as many as he remembered. Mars waved his wand round a bit an' bright white lights shot out, hitting some of the dementors. Each one that got hit withered away into nothin'.”

“He killed the dementors?” asked Hermione.

“I think Dumbledore said they were destroyed, not sure if there's a difference.

Well, it's my guess that the dementors ain't useta being challenged like that. After they saw so many of their mates destroyed, they apparently decided to cut their losses and run fer it. Mars started walkin' to the cells, but Dumbledore knew he had ter stop him. He hit Mars with the impediment jinx, but it didn't seem to affect him. Mars just turned an' smiled at Dumbledore,” said Hagrid, now perched, like the three teenagers, on the edge of his seat.

“It didn't stop him?” asked Hermione breathlessly.

“Nope. Mars said that he had expected Dumbledore, but not this soon. I think he had planned on havin' his talk with Sirius first.

“Me memory gets pretty sketchy round this part. I know Dumbledore tried ter talk some sense inter him, but then a lot of aurors showed up. Apparently, some of the dementors had run off fer help. The first few aurors attacked, but Mars stunned them.

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Dumbledore then convinced Mars to leave an' let him try to straighten things out before the battle got any worse.

“The Minister was absolutely furious an' wanted Mars dead. But Dumbledore managed to convince both sides ter meet an' talk about a fair trial fer both Mars an' Sirius. I think gettin' Sirius a real trial was the only reason Mars agreed ter a parlay. The Minister had lied ter Dumbledore, however; she had no intention of talkin'. Instead of meeting Mars an' Dumbledore with her aides fer discussion, she sent ten aurors ter kill Mars on sight!”

“She double-crossed Mars?” asked Ron.

“And Dumbledore?” added Hermione.

“Oh yeah, they showed up an' some of 'em cast the Killin' Curse at Mars,” said Hagrid.

“They didn't dare!” sputtered Hermione.

“They sure did; Mars somehow managed to dodge the curses an' went inter a rage. He killed five of the aurors an' almos' killed three more before Dumbledore could stop him,” answered Hagrid.

Harry couldn't believe his ears. How could a Minister be so corrupt? Ron swore and Hermione put her hands over her mouth nervously.

“Dumbledore was furious. He wen' ter Bagnold an' told her that her only chance at survival was to make a deal immediately. He told her if Mars could waltz righ' inter Azkaban so easily the Ministry would never be able ter protect her. The Minister was very scared. They agreed that a ten-year banishment as a Demon Fighter in the American West was acceptable. I think she only agreed because she thought Mars would never live ten years there. But I am still amazed Dumbledore got Mars ter agree ter leave without getting even with Bagnold or a trial for Sirius.”

“I can see why Mars said everyone thought he was a loose cannon,” said Harry,

amazed.

“Well, he was right the whole time,” added Ron.

“But to try and bust out Sirius out on his own? He killed half the guards in Azkaban, it sounds like,” said Hermione.

“He tried reasoning with them first, Hermione. You heard Hagrid. It was the right thing to do,” replied Ron.

“It was the only thing to do,” said Harry. “Sirius was innocent and Mars knew it.”

“Well I think we should get moving if we want t' have dinner tonight,” suggested Hagrid.

After dinner that evening they let Ginny in on what Hagrid had told them. Harry and Ron also filled the girls in about how Mars had learned how depressed they had been last year when Hagrid hadn't been there to greet them off the Hogwarts Express.

“So you think that's why he dragged Hagrid back from Tomintoul?” asked Ginny.

“It's the only motive that we can come up with,” answered Harry.

“That's a pretty extreme measure just to cheer us up,” worried Hermione.

“It wouldn't be the first time he had been extreme in doing what he thought was right now, would it?” Ron pointed out.

Chapter Fourteen – Old Hatreds



It was Thursday morning and Ron, Harry and Hermione had finished breakfast early, so they headed down to the dungeons for Double Potions. Ron was just starting his weekly complaint that he and Harry should never have signed up for the NEWT level potions class when they arrived at the classroom. Being early, they didn't expect Snape to have arrived yet, but to their surprise, the door to the classroom was ajar.

“Why is that door open?” asked Hermione.

“Yeah, old paranoid Snape never leaves the door unlocked anymore. Let's take a look,” said Ron, pushing the door fully open. Hermione's hand went up as though to stop Ron, but she let him enter the room unhindered, and she and Harry followed.

The classroom looked empty. Nervously, the three silently walked to their favorite

tables in the back. As soon as they had placed their bags on the floor, however, they heard a noise from behind Snape's desk. They all froze and stared at the desk. Finally, Harry spoke up.

“Who's up there?” he asked.

A familiar red head popped up over the top of the desk. It was attached to the tall, mean and very familiar form of the seventh year girl, Ester Spikes.

“What are you three doing in here without Professor Snape's permission?” she asked nastily.

“We could ask you the same thing, Ester,” Hermione countered.

“I doubt it, Granger. I know the three of you have stolen potion ingredients before, but I thought even you lot had more sense than to try it again,” sneered the Head Girl.

“We aren't stealing anything! We just came in to take our seats and you know it!” replied Hermione angrily.

“Don't let her goad you into something stupid, Hermione,” whispered Ron.

Hermione ignored his hypocrisy and started in on Ester again. “Just what were you doing snooping behind his desk, then?” she demanded.

“I wasn't snooping, Granger, and you'd better watch your attitude. You get into any more trouble and I might just have to recommend you be suspended as a prefect.

“I left something here from class yesterday, if that's any of your business. Just be glad I'm in a good mood so you lot escape without detention,” snarled Ester. She turned up her nose and left the room.

“You would think a mare like her would be better at lying,” said Hermione viciously.

Harry and Ron nodded in agreement.

A few minutes later Snape walked in, with the Slytherin students behind him. He seemed surprised to see the three of them already seated, but he only acknowledged their

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presence with a scowl. The rest of the class piled in and Snape addressed them.

“Settle down,” he needlessly ordered the silent students. “Today we will be mixing a difficult but very useful potion that any alchemist worth his salt will always have on hand. It is the Extinguishing Draught, and as its name implies, it will put out just about any fire, even most magical ones.” Snape pointed his wand at the board and a long list of ingredients and instructions appeared. “You have one hour before I test your potions on the fireplace.”

Harry read the instructions with great care. He didn't want to give Snape the satisfaction of giving him zero marks for the day again.

About halfway through the class, Snape announced that the potions should be thickening and sky blue in color. Harry's looked very close to that description; Hermione's was perfect, of course, but Ron's was a bit off. Its blue color was a little too deep, and it was not thickening at all. Harry saw Hermione whisper a few instructions to Ron out of the side of her mouth.

At the end of the hour Snape called the students up to his desk one by one to test the potions. Most of them managed to put out the fire. After each test, Snape would mark his register and the student would leave. By the time Ron's potion was tested, only the three of them and Padma Patil were still in the classroom.

Snape took Ron's sample flask and looked at it. The color and consistency perfectly matched Snape's requirements. He flicked his wand, said “Evanescio,” and the flask vanished.

“I saw Miss Granger helping you, Weasley. Tsk, tsk. I normally expect better from prefects, but with you I have become accustomed to sub-par work and rule-breaking. Zeros for all three of you, and be thankful I don't give you detention for cheating!” said Snape acidly.

Ron hung his head in shame, but Harry spoke up quickly. “No one helped me,

Professor! I was very careful and followed the instructions exactly,” he pleaded.

Snape just sneered at him.

“He's telling the truth professor,” said Hermione desperately. “I didn't help Harry at all and I only gave Ron a few hints. He's getting quite good at –”

“Silence! Why should I believe you for anything, Miss Granger? You've already shown your deceitfulness by cheating with Weasley here and with Longbottom earlier. Don't try to deny it now!” Snape thundered. “Ester told me all about you insulting me behind my back, and then you went and convinced that criminal Mars to override her punishments!” Snape was breathing heavily and glaring frighteningly at Hermione. “You'd better not count on that freak to keep baling you out; it won't be long until he's got himself killed or thrown out of Britain again, and then where will you be? Just a loud mouthed know-it-all who thinks she's special because she hangs around Harry Potter.”

Hermione looked petrified—Snape had never been so belligerent with her before—but Harry had suffered Snape's venomous abuse many times, and he was not about to let him treat Hermione the same way. “Leave her alone,” he shouted. “She didn't ask Mars to cancel her detention. And you've got some nerve calling him a criminal.”

Snape turned his gaze to Harry. “What's that suppose to mean, Potter?” he challenged.

“He means a Death Eater like you has no business calling anyone else a criminal!” interjected Ron. “Don't you dare insult him again. You sadistic, foul –”

“Enough!” shouted Snape. “It's obvious that Mars' insanity has rubbed off on the lot of you. We're going straight to McGonagall's office.”

“I told you not to insult Mars!” shouted Ron, stepping forward aggressively. Hermione grabbed Ron's robe to hold him back, but he ignored her, pulling her forward with him.

“Weasley, do you realize that threatening a teacher results in an automatic

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expulsion?” asked Snape in a disgustingly delighted voice.

“You've been threatening us for years and Dumbledore still lets you cower here away from your old Death Eater pals,” said Harry, as he stepped up shoulder to shoulder with Ron.

Snape had reached his boiling point; he went for his wand. Harry and Ron followed suit and then all three had their wands locked into position, staring poison at each other.

“Oh, Ron, don't! Please don't. Oh, Harry, stop this,” pleaded Hermione.

Just as the tension seemed about to boil over into disaster, Padma Patil burst into the room, clutching Professor Flitwick by his robes. Harry didn't remember seeing her leave, but obviously she had run off at the first sign of trouble to get her Head of House.

Flitwick looked at the situation, squeaked, “Oh my!” and then with astonishing speed pulled out his wand and said, “Impedimenta!,” knocking Harry and Ron flat on their backs, unable to move.

Snape put his wand away, looking furious at having missed his chance to curse them.

“Miss Patil, Granger: go back to your common rooms,” sneered Snape though his yellow teeth. “Professor Flitwick, if you would be so kind to escort these two miscreants to McGonagall's office, I will go and fetch her.”

He then spun and swooped bat-like out of the room.

Flitwick said very little on their trip to McGonagall's office. Once they arrived he merely ushered them inside, left, and closed the door behind him.

Harry felt very depressed. He and Ron had actually pulled their wands on a teacher; but Snape had pulled his first, dammit! But Harry knew Snape wouldn't tell it that way, and Snape would be the only one the other teachers would listen to. He sighed heavily.

“We're expelled for sure, mate,” said Ron gloomily.

“Yeah, I know. I just wish I could have hexed Snape first. I mean, if you're gonna

get expelled, you might as well earn it,” said Harry wryly.

Ron let out a gruff laugh. “Well, I’m not sorry I said what I did. I’m not going to let him talk to Hermione that way. Someone had to stand up to him. I can’t believe Dumbledore lets a gargoyle like that even teach us!” said Ron angrily.

Ron’s outburst rekindled Harry’s own anger. All these years Snape had been so horrible to everyone but Slytherins, but no one had ever stood up to him. Even when Snape tried to get Sirius and Lupin murdered by the dementors, Dumbledore had only fixed the situation by sleight of hand; he had not confronted Snape at all. Harry remembered that there had been one person who confronted Snape for his abuse: Sirius. All these powerful wizards and witches around, and only Sirius was brave enough to call Snape on his sadism. Harry was disgusted.

“You’re spot on. Snape only gets away with this because people let him. Sometimes you’ve got to suffer the consequences for doing the right thing,” replied Harry.

The two of them stewed for about twenty minutes before Professor McGonagall came into the office. Her mouth was very thin, and her eyes were full of anger as she glared at them. Harry did not wince, but merely stared back at her. He already knew he was going to be expelled, and he didn’t plan to go out cowering.

“I have never heard of such behavior from a Gryffindor in all my years at Hogwarts!” said McGonagall icily. “How dare you insult and then threaten a teacher? This is simply unprecedented. You two have pushed the limits before, but how could you even think of doing something like this?”

“He was abusing Hermione!” cried Ron fiercely.

“What do you mean, Weasley?”

“I mean he was insulting her and yelling at her. He enjoys abusing his students, and what do you do about it?” answered Ron.

“That’s enough, Weasley! Severus told me he caught you three cheating and was

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chastising you for it. I was quite shocked to hear that Miss Granger would do such a thing.”

“We weren't cheating. She was helping me with a few things for my potion. It's not like it was a test. Every other Professor encourages the students to help each other learn,” objected Ron.

“It is not up to you to decide how a Professor instructs his class! You lot knew perfectly well she was not allowed to help you with that potion,” snapped McGonagall.

Ron lowered his head in defeat. Harry, however, was still ready to go out swinging. “How about his abuse, huh? Hermione didn't help me at all and he still insisted that I cheated. It didn't matter what I did, he was going to give me a zero because he hates me!”

McGonagall's anger seemed to abate some at this.

“Now, Potter, I know Professor Snape does bear you some animosity, and he is harsh with you and your friends, but that does not give you the right to threaten him,” she said, more kindly.

“But he was insulting Mars,” Ron cried. “He called him a freak, a criminal, and said he was insane. He knows how much Mars means to us; I mean he saved half of my family's lives and Harry's too. Snape would NEVER have said that stuff to Mars' face!”

McGonagall looked surprised for a moment, but quickly recovered. “I think we all can agree that Professor Mars is quite capable of taking care of his own honor, Weasley. From now on you two should let him handle his own disputes with Severus.”

Harry now joined Ron in lowering his head in defeat.

“As for your punishments, you will lose fifty points each for Gryffindor. You both have twenty days detention, and I am suspending you from the first Quidditch match. That seemed the only punishment that got your attention last year, Potter,” said McGonagall sharply.

Harry was speechless. She had not said the word “expelled!”

“You mean we're not expelled, Professor?” asked Ron timidly.

“Not this time, Mr. Weasley. Let there be no doubt, however, that the leniency that Dumbledore and I have shown you two more than balances out the harshness that you claim comes from Professor Snape. I must warn you not to expect any more such mercy. This is the second time that the two of you have committed an act that would have normally called for expulsion. Rest assured that my patience is at an end with your rule breaking.

“You have missed lunch for the day. I know your next class is Transfiguration, but I am not in the mood to deal with you two any more today. You can go ahead and get started on your first detention by cleaning out the Owlery with Mr Filch. I'll make sure there is some dinner left for you in the Great Hall when you're done, and then you are to go straight to your Common Room afterward. Understand?”

They both nodded.

Ron and Harry hurried out of her office and headed towards the Owlery. As soon as they thought they were far enough away, they exhaled deeply in relief.

“Dodged a bit of jinx there, didn't we?” asked Ron.

“Too true. Mind you, we still got a lot of punishments,” added Harry.

“Better than being expelled,” offered Ron.

“Do you think your mum will send us both Howlers?” asked Harry nervously.

Ron looked terrified at the thought.

Cleaning the Owlery was hard and distasteful work, but Harry smiled the entire time. So did Ron, in fact, and this truly annoyed Filch, who spent the whole time trying to upset them, without effect: they had done the right thing, they were now suffering the consequences for it, but they had stood up to Snape's bullying and they were still in school. The feeling was almost as good as winning a Quidditch match.

When they had finished with the Owlery and washed up, Ron and Harry headed to

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the Great Hall, where roast beef and ham sandwiches waited for them. After having their fill of sandwiches and pumpkin juice, they walked wearily up to the Gryffindor Common Room. They were tired but undaunted as they gave the Fat Lady the password and walked in.

Most of the Gryffindors were still up, and they all looked at Harry and Ron nervously as the boys entered and shut the painting behind them. Two figures came streaking at them from near the fireplace, Ginny and Hermione, both looking worried and miserable. It was quite obvious that they had been crying.

“Were you two –” asked Hermione.

“Expelled?” finished Ginny.

Harry looked down at Ginny and smiled. He said toothily, “No, we just lost a lot of points and got loads of detentions.”

The room erupted in celebration. Ginny launched herself onto Harry and Hermione threw her arms around Ron. The embraces lasted almost a minute before the girls lead them over to the best chairs by the fire.

Neville, Katie, Mary, Dean, and Mark Evans joined them to hear the rest of the story from Harry and Ron. When they finished, everyone except Hermione looked delighted; Hermione, however, looked concerned.

“I am so proud of you both for standing up to him,” said Ginny. “He's been absolutely horrible to me all year. Much worse than before.”

“That's because he knows your family is so close with Mars, Ginny,” said Dean. “You can tell he hates Mars with every ounce of his body, but he knows better than to mess with him, so he abuses students close to Mars.”

“What a coward,” thundered Ron. “He fancies himself such an important and powerful wizard but he picks on students while he cowers from Mars.”

They all laughed, again with the exception of Hermione.

“Harry, Ron. No one is more happy and relieved that you two weren't expelled than me, but you mustn't do anything like this again,” Hermione said desperately. “Just ignore Snape! I know he's completely horrible to us, but I-I just don't know what I would do if you two weren't at Hogwarts with us. Please, please don't lose your tempers with Snape again. Promise me,” Hermione pleaded.

Harry looked at Ron. They both felt guilty for scaring Hermione, but Harry just couldn't promise not to do the right thing again. Ever since he had heard what Mars had risked to free Sirius, he had felt emboldened. His and Ron's defiant stand against Snape's abuse had encouraged him further. Not only had they managed to emerge relatively unscathed, but they were now being treated as heroes. Harry didn't want to give up this feeling. He could not decide how to answer Hermione's plea; fortunately he was spared the necessity by the entrance of an unexpected guest. Parvati and Lavender had just been leaving for the baths, towels and toiletries in hand, when they opened the door and squealed in surprise.

“Mars!” they yelled, and attached themselves to him for a hug.

“Hello, girls,” said Mars with his typical enormous grin. “You've got the Whisper Charm down for tomorrow, don't you?”

They both nodded enthusiastically.

“Well, then, I'll see you in class,” said Mars as he let go of them and headed inside.

Mark Evans and Katie Bell both ran up to him in greeting. Mark and Mars exchanged a weird handshake; Harry had no idea what it meant, but it seemed to thrill Mark. Katie gave Mars an enormous hug, and the three of them walked over to the fireplace.

“Well, I've heard a lot about you two today. Most of it seemed quite extraordinary, so I figured I would come by and get the story straight from the horse's mouth. Would you mind filling me in?” asked Mars.

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Harry and Ron both nodded nervously.

Mars then took out his wand and said “Elicio!” and a beautiful red leather coach appeared behind him. He sat down on it and invited Katie and Mark to join him. They complied, and he looked at Harry and Ron and spoke.

“I am sure you are tired of talking about it, but I really need to know everything that happened. I spoke with Padma and Minerva, but most of Minerva's knowledge came from Snape's side. Don't spare my feelings, you *never* have to fear telling me the truth.”

Harry and Ron started their tale from the point where Snape destroyed Ron's sample. Hermione helped them in a few spots to describe the argument that had followed. They finished by telling Mars how good they had felt about standing up to Snape, no matter the consequences. Harry really wanted to relate his feelings about Mars' attempted rescue of Sirius, but he knew it would be a bad idea with so many other Gryffindors listening.

Mars looked moved. Harry could swear he saw a tear glimmer in one eye. Mars leaned back and put a fatherly arm around Mark, who was sitting next to him.

“Boys, you have shown yourselves to be true Apprentices of Mars. Your loyalty and bravery are to be commended. You knew Snape was wrong to abuse Hermione like that, and you stood right up to him. There is no finer thing than to defend what is right. I am so proud of you,” he said.

“Those who show loyalty to me will always be rewarded. NEVER forget that. Now tell me the punishments that Minerva gave you,” requested Mars.

“We both got twenty days detention; we served the first one this evening; and lost fifty points each for Gryffindor. Oh and we're both are suspended from our first Quidditch match,” Harry related. Ron nodded in agreement.

“Twenty days? That's a lot of lost studying time,” said Mars thoughtfully. “I must see about that. And your first Quidditch match. It's against Slytherin, isn't it?”

“Yes, it is,” answered Ron.

“And Severus suggested that punishment to Minerva once the Headmaster refused to let you two be expelled,” stated Mars.

“Dumbledore was involved?” asked Harry.

“Oh yes, Severus called a bunch of the teachers together for the discussion, but for some reason I wasn't notified,” Mars smirked. “Luckily Padma came by my office and told me a few things.”

Harry and Ron both gripped their hands in fists. Harry thought it was just typical of Snape to try something underhanded to help Slytherin win the Quidditch Cup.

“Yes, yes. I will speak to a few teachers about this,” said Mars as he stood up.

“Don't think this mess gets you out of your homework on the Whisper Charm.”

Harry and Ron both gaped in surprise.

“Don't look at me like that. Hermione and Ginny here got the spell down pat during class. It's not that difficult; however, if you're polite maybe they,” Mars pointed at the two girls, “will assist you with it. I promise not to get abusive for having other students help you,” he grinned. He said good night to everyone and left the Common Room.

Ginny stood up and grabbed Harry by the hand, pulling him out of the chair.

“C'mon, we can go to the other side of the room and send messages to Ron and Hermione over here. You should be able to pick it up in no time,” said Ginny brightly.

While Ginny's idea was good, it didn't seem to be working. After an hour, neither Harry nor Ron had managed to cast the spell correctly. Harry was about to give up, and dispute Mars' claim that girls didn't have an advantage casting it, when Ginny and he heard Ron's voice whisper, “I'll never cast this stupid spell.”

Ginny and Harry both yelled in triumph and Harry then redoubled his efforts. After a few more tries, Harry, too, cast the charm correctly. It took about fifteen more minutes of practicing before they could cast the spell to Hermione's satisfaction. Once she

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sounded her approval, the four exhausted students went straight to bed.

The next morning, Harry and Ron met the girls in the Common Room and they headed down to breakfast together. As soon as they entered the Great Hall, Harry knew something was up. Normally only a few teachers would be there eating breakfast, but today it seemed almost all of them were present. The oddest part was that Dumbledore and Mars were among them. Dumbledore rarely had breakfast with the students, and Mars never ate in the Hall except for feasts. He had told Harry that he didn't like the food, which made Harry decide Charlie was right about his awful taste in food.

Mars gave them a friendly wave and went back to talking to Dumbledore. They seemed to be in the midst of a friendly argument, because both were talking fast and gesticulating frequently.

“Oh, no,” said Hermione. “Professor McGonagall is coming this way, and she doesn't look pleased.”

Harry agreed with Hermione's assessment: McGonagall looked quite annoyed when she reached them.

“Potter, Weasley, after further discussions with the staff there have been some adjustments to your punishments,” she said shortly.

Harry worked hard not to smile. Suddenly he felt a familiar sensation; it was the same one he'd while on the Hogwarts Express, but much fainter. He was positive someone was watching him closely – spying on him. He looked around to see if he could determine who it was and how they were doing it, but with hundreds of students in the Great Hall, he had no idea where to start.

“Professor Mars,” McGonagall said, glaring at Harry, “seemed to think that the twenty days of detention would put you too far behind in your studies. Instead, you will have two days of detention with Professor Mars, working on extra homework he has devised. Wipe that smile off your face, Weasley! You're still in a lot of trouble!” she

snapped.

Ron quickly did his best to straighten his features.

“The Quidditch suspension has also been lifted. But you will still both lose fifty points for Gryffindor,” she said firmly, and turned to leave.

A gentle breeze then ruffled their hair and McGonagall's, and they heard Mars' voice whisper, “Minerva, haven't you forgotten something?”

Professor McGonagall wrinkled her nose and turned back to the table. “There is one more thing: the four of you, and select students from other houses, will *temporarily* regard Professor Mars as your Head of House.”

They gaped in surprise.

“The Headmaster has decided the special curriculum being followed requires this.” McGonagall then turned to face the staff table defiantly and said, “Will that suffice, Professor?”

Seconds later they again felt the gentle wind and heard Mars whisper, “Yes, Minerva, that was excellent. Thank you so much for your cooperation.”

Then, with all the dignity she could manage, Professor McGonagall turned and walked quickly out of the Great Hall.

The teenagers sat in silence for a full minute before they could recover from the surprise of McGonagall's pronouncements. Harry was about say something about the reductions in their punishments when Mars walked over to them.

“Well, I think that set of punishments is a lot more in line, don't you all?” he asked.

Harry and Ron both agreed enthusiastically, but Hermione looked bothered. Mars must have noticed, because he asked her, “What's troubling you, Hermione? Be honest, now.”

“I understand why you got their punishments reduced, but was there any reason to humiliate Professor McGonagall? It's not her fault Professor Snape is so horrible to us,”

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said Hermione.

“I didn't mean for her to feel humiliated, but she insisted on delivering the message instead of letting me do it. If she was going to be the messenger, she needed to make sure all the information was passed on.

“And I would, however, argue that she does bear some of the blame for Snape's behavior. Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore have done very little to curb Snape's bullying or his complete negligence in steering Slytherins away from the dark side. We are at war, Hermione; I don't always have the luxury of sparing someone's feelings,” answered Mars.

Hermione looked mollified and nodded at Mars.

“Thanks, Mars!” said Ron. “Hopefully, we can get that one hundred points back during our first quidditch match.”

“Oh yes, the points. I knew I had forgotten something. We seem to be out of salt and pepper at the staff table. Ron, could you pass me the salt, Harry, the pepper, please?” asked Mars pleasantly.

Ron and Harry looked confused but passed him the spices.

“Thank you so much. Excellent job. Worth, I'd say, forty points for Gryffindor each, yes, I think that will do. I'll see you in class this afternoon,” said Mars as he headed back to the staff table.

“Mars,” called Ginny before he could leave. “How did you know what she said to us? Her back was turned to you, you couldn't have read her lips.”

“A simple spell that I may show your class later: The Listening Charm. Like the Whisper Charm, it can cause a lot of trouble, but it's great for nearby eavesdropping. However, it does have a flaw. Some witches and wizards have the talent to feel when it's being cast upon them. The better the caster, the harder it is to tell, but you shouldn't count on it always being undetected,” Mars answered, and then he left.

Most of the students at the Gryffindor table were chatting excitedly about getting eighty of their points back, but Harry thought back to his feelings of being watched on the Hogwarts Express. The feeling then had been much stronger, so the caster must have been less experienced than Mars. Apparently some student already knew the charm, and was very interested in what Harry had been saying to his friends.

Later that day, after Charms, Harry, Ron and Hermione ran into Ginny and the four of them headed down a corridor that led to the courtyard where they usually spent their break. They had just turned around a sharp corner when they stepped back in surprise; Professor Snape was standing in the middle of the hallway, looking down at them.

“So Potter, Weasley. You two think you can hide behind Mars to escape your just punishments, do you?” he sneered.

“They didn't ask Mars to help them,” interjected Hermione.

“I wasn't talking to you, but if I ever need help in cheating on an assignment I'll make sure to ask,” said Snape acidly.

Hermione bit her lip nervously. Snape returned his gaze to Harry.

“Mars can be a convenient ally for rogues, but his friendship carries a heavy price,” said Snape.

“What are you hinting at?” asked Ron hotly.

“I'm saying, Weasley, that your beloved Texan is playing the four of you for fools, just like he did your brothers years ago.”

“Oh you'll have to do better than that,” Harry laughed snidely.

“I'm trying to warn you how he operates, Potter. I'll admit Mars is cunning and powerful, but his most prevalent characteristic is his ruthlessness. I know the lot of you think he's some kind of guardian angel, but his good works are all done for the purpose of manipulating people, and are more than canceled out by his crimes.

“In the middle of his most infamous crime, he was foiled by the aurors who chased

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him off, but later they caught up to him and Mars murdered half of them. He would have killed the lot, but Dumbledore stopped him.”

“That was self-defense! They tried to kill him first, and you know it!” shouted Ron angrily.

“And it was no crime. Sirius was innocent. Sending him to Azkaban without a trial was the real crime,” added Harry.

Snape's eyes flickered with recognition and he spoke in a low voice. “I see he has told you his twisted version of the events. He must have his hooks buried very deep inside you.”

“But he didn't tell the story, Hagrid did,” Hermione protested.

For just a single second Snape looked fearful, but it faded. He took a deep breath and spoke again. “Therein, Miss Granger, lies an example of the extreme power of Mars' manipulation and corruption.”

“You're speaking nonsense,” said Harry derisively.

“Am I, Potter? Hagrid will have heard the story from Dumbledore, since he witnessed neither the breakout attempt nor the slaying of the aurors. While a powerful wizard like Dumbledore has always been able to resist the temptation of the Dark Side, he has met his match with the corruption of Mars. Dumbledore, for all his greatness, does have a glaring weakness that Mars immediately attacked. His willingness to trust those whom most find untrustworthy,” said Snape.

“Isn't that funny,” said Harry scathingly. “Mars said the same thing about you.”

“Naturally he did. Don't be such a fool, Potter. I am one of the few smart enough to see through Mars' disguise and brave enough to stand up to him. Dumbledore's trusting nature let him fall under Mars' spell.

“Mars has made a tremendous effort to bewitch the four of you. His tools of manipulation are many and powerful. He has endless wealth, powerful magic lore, a

golden tongue, and freakish powers to tempt you into his fold. He has worked very hard to make you part of his faithful following.

“With you, Potter, he knew how you longed for someone who could understand your situation. Your isolation made you weak to his promises, and his empathy told him which buttons to press. I imagine you were the easiest to control.”

“Control?” sputtered Harry. “He saved my life twice! Without him, my relatives, who *were* under Voldemort's control, would have drugged me and turned me over to the Death Eaters.”

Snape snarled, “Didn't you ever think that he could be the one who put them under the curse in the first place? He needed to move you away from Dumbledore's protection and put you under his own. Once you were with the Weasleys, you were grateful to him; and his influence over members of that family is long established.”

Harry didn't know what to think. He didn't want to believe what Snape was saying, but there was a horrifying logic to it.

“You lie!” shouted Ron. “Mars would never hurt Harry.”

“Oh, I agree with that, Weasley,” replied Snape with relish. “Mars needs Potter for his plans, but anyone who gets in his way is fair game to this ruthless killer. Potter's muggle relatives mean nothing to him.

“You and your sister had your bloodlines going against you in fighting his bewitchment. Your two oldest brothers could never resist anything Mars suggested, and while your mother looked as though she had thrown off his spell, she quickly succumbed to his power once Mars returned.

“You, Granger, were the only one who stood a real chance of avoiding his domination. Being muggleborn, you had no links to his past and did not suffer from the Dark Lord's reign. But he still knew how to seduce you. Greedy for knowledge, you were an easy target for his extensive magical lore. He also learned of your pathetic ideas on

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house-elf emancipation and pretended he cared. You fell for his act completely.”

Hermione looked almost in tears as she answered. “But he saved me and my parents,” she whispered.

“You mean he said he did. Most likely he jinxed your car just enough to scare you and then later claimed credit for stopping the attack,” sneered Snape.

“You're lying!” shouted Ginny, in tears. “You just hate Mars because he's exposed you for the fraud you are.” She pointed her finger at him accusingly.

“Ginny, no, we swore an oath,” said Harry quickly. He feared Ginny was about to accuse Snape of being the spy that Mars had discovered.

“Just what are you implying?” demanded Snape as he glared down at Ginny.

Ginny looked at Harry, and he shook his head at her, thinking, “No, don't mention the spy.”

She inhaled loudly and then shrieked at Snape, “I hate you!” Then she stormed passed him.

“C'mon, lets get away from him before I'm ill,” said Harry as he grabbed Ron and Hermione by the arms and turned back down the corridor he had just come from.

“Granger, you think about what I said. You're supposed to have brains inside that bushy head of yours. Use them now before it's too late,” Snape called after them.

Chapter Fifteen – The Spy Who Loathed Me



Harry and his friends walked in silence for a minute or so before splitting up to their various errands. Hermione looked dreadful; she left for her Arithmancy class in a daze. Ron had still been in shock when Harry had led him away from Snape, but by now he was furious. Before Ron left for the Common Room, he told Harry, “Remember, Snape hates us and Mars. We should never believe him.”

Harry wanted desperately to believe what Ron had said, but Mars did sometimes seem too powerful and too good to be true. Harry would just manage to convince himself that Snape was a filthy liar, and then he would remember how baffled he had been by all the things that Mars claimed to have done. Snape's accusations cast doubt on Mars' more

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Herculean accomplishments, but Harry didn't want to believe his charges—not at all. Especially since they were coming from Snape.

Harry was in no mood to teach today. Earlier he had really been looking forward to teaching the Water Spout Spell, but now he could barely concentrate enough to find his way to the classroom. Once he arrived, he went through his lesson plan listlessly; he explained the spell, showed the class how to cast it, put the instructions on the board, and told the class to practice the charm. Once they had managed to cast the spell themselves, he told them, they were free to leave. Harry then sat down at his desk, his mind returning inevitably to Snape's accusations.

Arguments raged in his head. Each time Harry thought of an event involving Mars that surely must have been genuine, he could think up a way that it could have been a setup to earn the loyalty of Harry and his friends. The explanations forming in his head grew more wild by the minute. One moment Harry found himself considering the possibility that Mars had formed the Committee Against Dark Sorcerers solely so that he could rescue Percy from them, and the next minute his imagination had Mars protecting all of Britain single-handedly.

Harry feared he might go insane if he couldn't relax. What he needed was his own pensieve to remove these outlandish theories. Then Harry remembered Mars' Occlumency lessons. Every night he had cleared his mind the way Mars had taught him, and that always relaxed him. He decided to try it now, in his classroom.

He thought of a beautiful starry night, of the constellations and the planets that formed the sphere of lights around the earth. Thoughts of its endless, lovely rotation began to relax him. He pictured in his mind's eye the nebulae and their fantastic colors. The rings of Saturn and the moons of Jupiter spun into view, and all thoughts of Snape and Mars were completely forgotten. Harry drifted far away.

“Harry, Harry. Can you hear me? Are you all right?” a young girl's voice came into

Harry's mind. "Harry! Say something, you're scaring us!"

"Huh?" muttered Harry.

"Say something sensible, Harry, or I'm going to get the nurse!" the girl sounded slightly panicky, but this time Harry recognized her: it was Heather Parkinson.

"No, no, Heather. I'm all right. I just drifted off," answered Harry.

"You sure are a heavy sleeper, Harry," said Mark Evans, who was standing next to Heather.

"Well, I didn't sleep well last night," Harry lied. He sat up and looked around; all but six students in front of him had left. They all seemed worried about him, but Harry was finally able to convince them to go to lunch. He gathered up his things and headed to the Great Hall himself.

The Occlumency training had given Harry the ammunition he needed to convince himself that Snape was lying. Mars had taught him Occlumency very well, so well that by the end of Harry's fourth lesson (which was during the second week of school), he had been able to fend off all Mars' attacks immediately. If Snape was right and Mars had been trying to bewitch him, why on earth would he teach Harry exactly how to counter that attack? His mood brightened as he sat down beside Katie Bell, across from Ron, at the Gryffindor table.

"Where's Ginny and Hermione?" Harry asked.

Katie answered. "Before Ron got here they both came up, grabbed a few pieces of fruit, and left without saying anything. They looked really upset. Do either of you know what's wrong?"

Ron nodded and said simply, "Snape."

Katie sighed.

After Katie left, Harry explained to Ron how the Occlumency lessons had convinced him of Mars' good intentions.

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“Well, it only took me a minute or so to realize what Snape was up to, but you're right about the Occlumency lessons. That should convince anyone,” said Ron.

“We have to tell Mars in class today,” offered Harry.

“You sure you want to do that? I don't think I can repeat what Snape said, Harry, not to Mars' face. I'd feel wretched,” replied Ron.

“But he'd want to know. Especially since we think Snape is the spy. I mean, this could be one of Voldemort's missions for Snape. You know, to get us at each other's throats,” said Harry.

Ron paused thoughtfully and then agreed.

Harry and Ron did not have a class before Defense Against the Dark Arts, so they went to the library to do their Care of Magical Creatures assignment. They needed to write a two foot essay on the Murtlap. It was a ratlike creature that inhabited the coastal areas of Britain. Harry remembered soaking his hands in a solution of its strained and pickled tentacles last year to ease the pain of the cuts on his hand. He struggled for a while to somehow write this into his essay before Ron reminded him it was time to go to class.

When they walked into the classroom, Harry saw Ginny was sitting next to Luna and Katie as usual; she looked very upset. She did not meet his gaze. Hermione was in back; she still looked miserable. Harry and Ron sat down on each side of her.

“Hermione, Harry's got it settled. The Occlumency lessons are a dead give-away. You don't have to worry any more,” said Ron.

“We have to talk to him after class,” replied Hermione quietly.

“Course we will, it'll all be settled,” said Ron confidently.

Harry, however, noticed that Hermione looked anything but confident.

A few times during the class Harry saw Ginny turn and scowl at Hermione. Each time, Hermione sighed sadly, and sometimes she would wipe a tear from her eyes. It was

obvious that they had had a row, and Harry knew what it had to be about. He sighed himself: just when he thought he couldn't hate Snape any worse ...

Class started with a lecture on recognizing dangerous runes and wards. It was not necessary to be an expert to spot them, Mars told the class, but it would take some knowledge to know which ones posed the most risk. He gave a quick overview of the most common examples, and assigned homework to identify the thirty most heavily-used defensive wards in Britain.

After the lecture, Mars had everyone demonstrate competency with the Whisper Charm by sending a message to him at his desk. A few students still needed help casting the spell; those pupils received even more homework.

Eventually, everyone had tried the spell and class was dismissed. As usual, many students crowded around Mars' desk for a short chat before leaving. Harry, Ron and Hermione waited in their seats for the other students to leave. They watched Ginny walk up and wait behind the chatting students. As the last pupils trailed out of the room, the three of them approached Mars and Ginny.

Harry thought that Mars would tell them off for not paying attention to his lecture, but he didn't. Mars' eyes were full of concern as he looked at the four of them.

“Well, it's obvious that you two,” said Mars, pointing at Ginny and then Hermione, “have been fighting. But only one of you looks mad.” He stared at Ginny. “What caused this?”

“Snape,” hissed Ron.

“What could've Severus done to make them mad at each other? I mean, I could see them getting mad at him,” asked Mars.

“It's simple, Mars,” Ginny broke in. “Hermione believes all of Snape's lies about you. She thinks that you're manipulative and evil. She believes you lied about saving her parents and that you are using us to help you control Harry,” Ginny finished venomously.

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Mars, Ron and Harry all flinched violently. “Ginny, that's a horrible thing to say,” replied Hermione tearfully. “I just want to ask Mars about the accusations. It's the only thing that makes sense, don't you see?”

“I'll tell you what I see, shall I? I see an ungrateful and egotistical girl who thinks she knows more than than the greatest wizards on Earth. Someone who –” spat Ginny before Mars interrupted her.

“Ginny, please,” said Mars, tugging on her robe sleeve. “We're all friends here. You can't let something Severus Snape said make you forget that.”

“It's not me who's forgotten who my friends are,” snarled Ginny, moving protectively between Hermione and Mars.

“It's not like that,” said Hermione desperately.

“Okay, I think I need to have you two,” said Mars, pointing at Harry and Ron, “tell me exactly what Severus said. Ginny, Hermione: hold your tongues for a bit.”

Harry, who was a bit calmer than Ron, told Mars about Snape's accusations. Mars listened carefully and only visibly reacted twice, with a slight snarl: to the charge that he may have cursed Harry's muggle relatives himself, and the charge that he had jinxed the Grangers' car. However, Mars laughed out loud when Harry related Snape's declaration that Dumbledore himself was under the influence of Mars.

“He really said that? Are you sure you're not embellishing the story just to make ole Snapesy look stupid?” asked Mars mirthfully.

The four teenagers all frowned at Mars' levity.

“Course I'm sure, Mars. He really got us worked up for a bit; even I was starting to believe he could be telling the truth,” said Harry firmly.

“No offense intended, Harry, but the idea that anyone could have control over Albus Dumbledore is ludicrous, can't y'all see that?” Mars looked around. When none of them nodded, Mars sighed. “You really think that if I wanted to, I could control

Professor Dumbledore?” he asked incredulously.

“Not control him completely like a puppet,” said Hermione quickly. “But have undue influence over him. Like convincing him to let you move Harry from his relatives' house, canceling the punishments of your favorite students—” Harry, Ron and Ginny all inhaled at this and stared at Hermione; she flinched, but bravely continued, “—or even switching said students to your own disciplinary control.”

Ginny glared nastily at Hermione.

“An excellent set of questions, Hermione, all of which have good answers; but I fear that the nagging doubt that Snape seems to have put into your head will always see a problem with my explanations. It's virtually impossible to *disprove* an allegation; that's why in our legal system one is supposedly innocent until proven guilty.

“There are, however, some things I can point to that should make you reconsider who deserves the benefit of the doubt. If I could convince Professor Dumbledore to put Harry's safety in jeopardy; if I had that kind of clout with him; don't you think I could have convinced him to have dropped Snape from the Order of the Phoenix once I gave him irrefutable evidence that Snape was providing information to the Death Eaters?”

“Aha!” exclaimed Ron triumphantly. “I told you he was the spy, Hermione.”

Hermione ignored the gloating Ron and looked steadily at Mars. “Are you sure that Snape's the spy?” she asked carefully.

“Not only am I sure, so is the Headmaster,” replied Mars.

“Then why has he let that traitor stay in the Order and at Hogwarts?” asked Harry hotly.

“As much as I hate to come to the defense of Severus, it's not that simple. While he *is* the reason that Voldemort has the inside scoop on the Order's activities, he did not betray the Order purposely,” answered Mars grimly.

“What? He just *accidentally* started working for Voldemort again?” asked Harry

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sarcastically.

Mars rolled his eyes and gave a small smile. “Harry, do you know what the Dark Mark is?”

“Yes,” he said slowly. “It's horrible. A large green skull with a snake sticking out of it like some kind of demonic tongue. The Death Eaters conjure it after they've killed.” Harry shivered slightly. The others nodded nervously.

“There is another kind of Dark Mark, and it's much more insidious,” said Mars.

“The one on the arms of the Death Eaters? Voldemort uses it to tell his followers to come to him,” answered Hermione, trembling.

“Yes. Very few people know of that mark, Hermione, and fewer still know the full effects of having one. The mark does much more for Riddle than allow him to send a summons to his Donnies; it's an indelible link between them,” explained Mars.

“A link? You mean they can communicate with it?” asked Harry.

“I told you: it's much more sinister than that. Once Voldemort has marked you, part of him is in you forever. A lot like your scar, Harry,” answered Mars.

“But then it's two-way. The follower would be able to spy on Voldemort?” suggested Harry.

“Remember that this mark, unlike yours, was designed by Voldemort. It works the way *he* wants it. Your spying on Voldemort was a shock to him; this link was his own creation. He knows exactly how it works. If he can overcome the defenses of the mark bearer, he can hear what they hear, see what they see, and even peek inside their minds.”

“That's how Snape was the spy and didn't know it?” asked Ron.

“Yes, Ron. Only a select few Death Eaters knew this secret: Dolohov, Malfoy –”

“And Karkaroff!” interrupted Hermione.

“Very sharp, Hermione. That's how they found out Karkaroff was in Denmark, and when I got to him first it was one of the secrets he divulged,” said Mars, smiling at her.

“You can see now why I released only a small amount of my intelligence when I spoke at the Order's meeting. With Snape present, not only could I not talk about the unwitting spy, but everything I said had a good chance of going straight to Malfoy and Riddle.”

“Malfoy?” spat Harry and Ron.

“Oh, yes; all the time that Snape thought he was using his connections with the Malfoys to spy on Voldemort, they were actually using the arrogant fool to gather information,” answered Mars.

The teenagers were silent for a few moments as these revelations swept over them.

“Didn't Dumbledore make you and the others swear not to tell anyone who the spy was?” Ginny broke the lull.

“He made Charlie, Bill and Fleur swear; but I wouldn't,” Mars replied. “I did, however, promise not to tell anyone, even you four, unless the Headmaster and Snape failed to stop up the intelligence leaks. And from the events of last night, it's terribly apparent that Snape has not managed to block off his mind. It's hardly an easy thing to do; Tom Riddle is one of the greatest Legilimens in history.”

“Last night? What happened?” Harry asked.

“I can't tell you what the mission was, but three Order members were involved. They were ambushed in a way that suggests that the Donnies had advance knowledge of the whole mission. As a result—all were killed,” said Mars sadly.

The teenagers all gasped.

“One of them was an old friend of mine, Sturgis Podmore,” Mars continued. “So you can see that even before you brought me this news, Severus Snape had already earned my wrath.”

Ginny looked sad and patted Mars' hand in sympathy.

Harry was a loss for words. How could have Dumbledore allowed this? He looked at Hermione to see if she had come to her senses yet about Snape's duplicity; Ron, Ginny

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and Mars looked at her also.

“I want to believe that Snape is a disgusting liar, I really do, but how could he have fooled Dumbledore for so long?” she said timidly.

The others sighed angrily, but Mars spoke to her gently.

“He didn't fool Dumbledore. That's what I've been trying to explain to you. Snape had no idea the mark could do this to him.

“I'll tell you what. Meet me in my office tonight at eight. Professor Dumbledore and Snape will both be there. I plan to finally convince Professor Dumbledore that he must quit trusting Snape with sensitive information. You can see for yourselves if I use beguilement or logic to convince the Headmaster, but while Snape is in the room, I need you to remain silent. Once he has left, you can ask questions of Dumbledore or myself. Does that sound fair?”

“It's a lot more proof that *Snape* ever offered,” said Harry.

Hermione looked at Mars without meeting his eyes. She murmured, “Yes, that sounds fair.”

The four students left for the Great Hall in silence. Harry sensed Ginny's anger at Hermione, but she seemed to at least be containing it now. When they reached the Gryffindor table, Hermione sat down away from the others. Ron looked after her uncertainly, then at Harry. Harry nodded at him; Ron walked over to sit beside Hermione.

None of them said much during dinner; when they had finished, they carefully agreed to study with each other in the library until eight. Harry couldn't concentrate on his work at first, so he decided to try clearing his mind again. This time he made sure that he didn't clear it too much; he stopped his meditation as soon as his tension faded. Harry quickly finished his essay on Murtlaps and started studying defensive runes and wards. Unbelievably, when eight o'clock arrived and Ron pointed out that it was time to leave, Harry realized that he had just experienced his most productive study hour ever. As they

left the library, he decided to try clearing his mind before each study session in the future.

When they reached the door to Mars' office, Harry knocked. Mars' voice invited them in, but as Harry reached for the knob he saw letters swirling around on the door. From the murmurs behind him, Harry guessed that the others had seen them also. They slowly formed into words:

Remember, be silent while Snape remains.

Harry nodded to himself and opened the door. As they walked in, they saw Mars sitting behind his desk, grinning as usual. In front of the desk sat Professor Dumbledore, in one of his chintz armchairs, and Professor Snape, on a typical desk chair. Mars motioned for them to join the group.

Snape scowled at their approach. "I thought only Potter was coming. I didn't realize half of your fan club was invited, Mars."

They ignored his scowl and took seats in the four comfy armchairs that Dumbledore conjured for them.

"Now that we're all here—well, I'm assuming this is all—" Snape added, looking at Dumbledore, who nodded at him, "—I would like to know why."

"I'll be happy to answer that question for you, Severus," offered Mars.

"I hope we're not about to be bored out of our skulls with another one of your paranoid predictions of the future, Mars. It's bad enough that my students have to be subjected to your insane ramblings, but I draw the line at having to listen to your drivel myself," said Snape condescendingly.

Harry scowled at Snape; he heard Ron's sharp intake of breath. He knew very well that Snape only dared insult Mars because Dumbledore was in the room. Snape and Draco Malfoy seemed to be cut from the same cloth.

"Well, Severus, I'll let you judge the insanity of what I have to say, but it does involve your immediate future, and you will listen," replied Mars nonchalantly. The

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threat implicit in those words, in spite of Mars' calm delivery, got everyone's attention. Mars stood up, leaned his hands onto the desk, and stared at Snape, who averted his eyes.

“To say you and I dislike each other would be an understatement. But then, you have many enemies, don't you? There's all those people you hurt as a Death Eater; and, of course, the Donnies themselves can't be too happy that you escaped the horrors of Azkaban that they were forced to endure. Then, to add insult to injury, you holed up with the Death Eaters' greatest enemy, Albus Dumbledore.

“Yes, a lot of people want you dead, but you hid behind the power of Dumbledore and survived these last fifteen years. His power, however, cannot protect you from me.”

Harry's eyes flicked from Snape to Mars and back again. Snape was difficult to read, but his eyes were darting around the room; perhaps he was preparing himself for a fight? Mars, however, maintained his calm demeanor in spite of his warlike words. Harry had seen Mars truly upset before; so far Mars had shown none of his earlier fury.

“I didn't travel five thousand miles to earn a teacher's salary, Severus. I came here to ensure a victory over our enemy, Tom Riddle. Harry here is the key to our success. He must be taught, and he must be protected. I will *not* allow you to jeopardize everything in your pursuit of personal glory. I'll kill you first if I have to,” said Mars, still with icy calm.

“Did you all just hear Mars, that paragon of humility, accuse *me* of being a glory hound?” Snape asked sarcastically; but he was looking increasingly nervous.

“You certainly snuggled up to Fudge after he mentioned getting you the Order of Merlin; don't you remember? You were trying to have Remus and Sirius murdered by Dementors,” snapped Mars, his calmness beginning to give way to anger.

Harry remembered Mars seeing this memory in his mind during their first Occlumency lesson; the reminder of this event made him scowl even more deeply at Snape.

Mars' angry accusations continued. "Your Occlumency lessons last year were much worse than the simple failure that Harry and Professor Dumbledore believed them to be. They were a farce. You were, in fact, weakening Harry's primitive natural defenses with your undisciplined probes. You also failed to instructed him how to properly defend himself or clear his thoughts."

Harry, Hermione and Dumbledore all jerked a bit at this; they each looked as if ideas had begun racing through their brains. Snape looked as though he had been stabbed; he almost staggered backwards before composing himself.

"Paranoid drivell..." Snape managed to say unconvincingly in his defense.

Mars stood up straight and walked around behind Harry's chair.

"You were using Harry as bait; you had tried to match wits with Riddle, but failed. Voldemort, however, was willing to take risks when it came to Harry here, and you knew he would expose himself in order to trick the boy. You made it easier for him to see into Harry's mind, and tried to gain information from the intrusion. You then had the gall to castigate this poor boy for never getting better at Occlumency, even though that was always your plan!

"Either that, or you actually wanted Harry to walk into that trap at the Department of Mysteries because you never really left Voldemort's fold," snarled Mars.

Snape grabbed his upper arm for a moment as though it pained him. He hissed, "Dumbledore trusts me!"

"Maybe for not much longer, Severus," Mars said dangerously.

"Maybes don't make it so, now do they, Mars?" asked Dumbledore, breaking his long silence.

"Oh, I quite agree, Headmaster," Mars nodded, "but I have a lot more than conjecture to back me up. His behavior here has never been that of a reformed villain. He has turned the Slytherins from the others, encouraged them to consider themselves elite

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and believe themselves better than 'those pathetic half-blood and muggleborn loving houses,'" said Mars mockingly.

"He has routinely tried to get Harry Potter expelled, even though he knows how important Harry's education and safety are to all of us! He has put his personal vendettas and a school boy's old hatreds ahead of our cause time after time. He is simply too great a risk to tolerate anymore," finished Mars with a glare at Snape.

"He is not the only one harboring old grudges," said Dumbledore sagely.

"But mine have not interfered with our mission, not ever! If I hadn't put them aside for now, do you think he would be here, breathing at this very moment? Or did you forget what happened to my mother? You do remember her, don't you?" asked Mars hotly.

Dumbledore looked cross for a moment, but the look faded and he asked, "So, you want me to throw Severus to the wolves then?"

"For starters," replied Mars coldly.

"Headmaster, don't listen to his foul council. I have always been loyal," said Snape, sounding braver than he looked.

"Loyal to whom? That is the question, Severus," Mars growled.

"For fifteen years I have served your cause. Now this barbarian comes back with, with his insane theories, threatening me! I can't believe you even listen to this criminal. He –" Snape began, speaking quickly and nervously.

"Enough!" snapped Dumbledore loudly. "Mars, your case is very strong, and I find myself agreeing with most of what you said. Severus just has not come around the way we had all hoped," finished Dumbledore, shaking his head.

Snape looked stunned, but Mars instantly had his wand out and pointed at Snape. "Excellent! Shall I send him to Antarctica without his wand to freeze to death, or just turn him into a trout and feed him to the giant squid?" Mars grinned evilly.

Snape reached for his wand, fumbled, groped in his robes. His hands passed

frantically over his torso, searching for the missing wand, to Mars' evident amusement.

“Forget something, Severus?”

“Blast your eyes! What have you done with it?”

“Oh, you won't be needing a wand where you're going.”

“Mars,” interjected Dumbledore. “You didn't let me finish. While I agree that I have ignored many troubling signs of Professor Snape's behavior, I am not going to sack him yet.”

“No need to sack him once he's squid bait. I'll teach Potions for the rest of the year,” volunteered Mars helpfully.

“No, Mars, you must wait.”

Dumbledore turned to Snape. “Severus, you need to understand the gravity of your situation. Mars is not the only one who suspects you, but he *is* the only one I cannot protect you from. If you provoke him again by endangering his plans, he will eliminate that threat—that being you, of course—and there is no wizard or witch in Britain that could stop him.

“I think it is time for you leave now. Mars, please put away your wand and give Severus his.”

Mars immediately tucked his wand back into his belt. “You'll find your wand stuck to the outside of the door,” he said as he walked around to his seat behind the desk.

Snape stormed bat-like to the door and tried to slam it behind him, but it shut silently.

“Well?” asked Mars staring at Dumbledore.

“Feeble.”

“You really think so?”

“Yes, Mars; it's a good thing you were not born a squib, because you would have failed miserably as an actor,” answered Dumbledore with a smile.

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“Oh, that is harsh, old man, way harsh!”

Harry and the others were completely lost. They thought they had just seen two of their teachers a split second away from a duel to the death; they were in no shape to follow the conversational nuances between Dumbledore and Mars.

“Let me get a second opinion from our closer audience, shall I?” asked Mars. Dumbledore nodded his approval; Mars looked at the teenagers. “So, did you four think I was about to whack ole Snapesy?”

The two Weasleys nodded their heads affirmatively; Harry and Hermione shook theirs. “We've seen you upset before, Mars,” Harry explained. “When you told off Draco Malfoy for calling Hermione a mudblood, you looked terrifying.”

“Yes, your eyes were absolutely glowing with anger,” Hermione added, somewhat nervously. “Tonight, you just looked amused while you were threatening Snape—er, I mean, Professor Snape.”

Mars' face dropped in disappointment.

“If it makes you feel any better,” Dumbledore said consolingly, “I am sure Severus believed your performance. And since it is precisely the sort of animosity that Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy have been hoping for, I think they too will accept our story as the truth.”

“Professor. Can you please tell us what's going on here?” asked Ginny.

Dumbledore smiled warmly at her and began his explanation. He told the teenagers how Mars had convinced him that he was right about Snape, once he heard about the dreadful end that the three Order members had met with. Because they didn't want Voldemort and the Death Eaters to know they were on to the leak, they needed a good excuse to cut Snape out of the information loop. The rivalry between Mars and Snape was well known, and it seemed believable that the two might come to blows over the treatment of Harry Potter and his friends.

Dumbledore then explained that Snape was allowed to stay at Hogwarts because he could be used unwittingly to feed false information back to Voldemort. Mars and Dumbledore also planned to use the children of Death Eaters at the school to give bad intelligence to their enemies.

“So Snape doesn't know that you two set him up?” asked Ron.

“Nope,” answered Mars.

“So he's really fuming back in his quarters as we speak, with no idea how amused we are?” asked Harry, smiling.

“Wonderful, isn't it?” asked Mars. “It's about time he got slapped down a few rungs.”

Even Hermione managed a smile. She then looked to be screwing up her courage and finally asked Mars a question. “If you weren't really trying to manipulate us like Professor Snape was saying, why did you insist on Hagrid being back before the term started?”

The question was a good one; even Ginny didn't seem angry with Hermione for asking it. She looked at Mars inquisitively, along with the others.

“I see that y'all can still get anything you want out of Hagrid, can't you?” answered Mars, smiling at her. “Well, I would have thought that since Harry and Ron were with me the morning of the wedding, they could have answered that for you.”

Harry looked at Mars in disappointment. “You mean you *did* only bring him back because Ron and I complained about not seeing him when we got off the Hogwarts Express the year before?”

“What? Don't be ridiculous, Harry. Don't you remember me telling Magorian that he, Dumbledore, Hagrid and I had to get together to settle the dispute over Firenze?” said Mars.

“Yeah,” Harry said, beginning to look enlightened.

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“Well, I needed Hagrid for that, didn't I? If he didn't come back until halfway through the school year, who knows how many of you would have been used as pincushions by hacked-off centaurs? No matter how dire the warnings, I have never heard of a Headmaster that has successfully kept all of the students out of the Forbidden Forest for an entire year. Have you, Professor?” asked Mars.

Dumbledore shook his head and smiled. Harry, Ron, Ginny, and especially Hermione exhaled in relief.

After such an intense session, the students were too mentally drained to dredge up further questions for Mars; they decided to call it a night. Hermione seemed convinced of Mars' innocence; she hugged him good night, along with Ginny, before they left. Harry and Ron exchanged smiles as they listened to Hermione and Ginny chatting amicably about the evening's events on the trek to Gryffindor tower. They were both grateful to see the animosity ended between the girls.

Harry climbed into his four-poster bed feeling better than he had in days. All of his friends were talking to each other again, and he had witnessed Snape getting some of his own medicine. What better way to end the week?

Chapter 16 – The Dark Arts



Potions class had been very different during the two weeks following Snape's and Mars' confrontation. Snape still gave Harry and Ron plenty of dirty looks, but his usual snide comments were missing. In fact, Snape spoke to them as little as possible, and only when his role as a teacher demanded it. For Harry, this change was a most welcome one. Without the constant derision and harassment, he found himself learning quite a bit as he worked.

Defense Against the Dark Arts, however, had taken a turn for the worse. Mars seemed irritated that the class was not picking up the lessons as quickly as he expected. Only Hermione and Padma had managed to learn any of his advanced curriculum – the Unified Astronomical Somatics System, or UAS—and even they had only been able to

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grasp small parts of it, although both girls did seem very excited about it.

Harry now understood why their textbook had been about Astronomy. According to Mars' system, the location of the planets (or “wanderers,” as Mars called them) were key to proper wand movement when casting a spell. Their positions in relation to each other and their placement amongst the stars each night called for changes in wand gestures depending on the spell. Water charms, for example, were affected by a single planet, Neptune; most jinxes, on the other hand, were affected by the placement of two or three planets at once. The class was growing disheartened because there were so many different things that Mars expected them to know instantly and apply immediately to the spell they were casting.

After two weeks with little progress, Mars gave up in disappointment. “Starting next week I'll split the class into three groups and teach each group what I think will help you the most. Don't worry, Hermione and Padma; you two will keep learning the UAS methods, but we'll go a little slower,” said Mars.

“I just can't justify putting so many of you on the path to learning UAS so that years from now you'd be able to defend yourselves expertly—not with the trouble we have today. We need to make sure that all of you can defend yourselves as best as possible right now. Voldemort won't wait until—” Mars stopped mid-sentence when the students in the class, with the exception of Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny, flinched strongly at the name Voldemort. He looked more cross than ever.

“Oh I can't believe it. After all you went through last year, all the teaching from Harry and now myself, and this advanced class still fears saying or hearing his name?” asked Mars incredulously.

Most of the class hung their heads, embarrassed. Mars beckoned toward Harry, Hermione, and the Weasleys. “Okay, you four come on up here.” He then lined them up facing the class and stood behind them. “Go ahead Ron, Harry, say his name—loudly,”

suggested Mars.

“Voldemort!” Harry and Ron yelled in unison. Unsurprisingly the students winced, but Harry jumped at a comical cry of fear from behind him. He turned in time to see Mars leap catlike up on top of his desk and whip out his wand. Jabbing his wand around the room nervously, Mars cried, “Do any of you see him? Did he apparate here at the sound of his name looking for blood?”

A wave of nervous laughter rippled around the room, but a few of the students looked cross.

Mars jumped down from the desk and put his hand on Hermione's shoulder.

“Maybe it's just feminine voices that he can hear. We can't afford to take any chances, you know? Hermione, Ginny: would you mind following the boys' fine example?”

“VOLDEMORT!” they yelled, even louder than Harry and Ron.

Again the class winced, but this time quite a few students tried to control their reaction.

Mars looked around and then held his hand to his ear. “He doesn't seem to be in the classroom, but what's that I hear outside?” He leaped at the door and snatched it open. His wand had transfigured into a fiery white sword as Mars jumped into the hall, yelling, “Have at you!”

Two young girls could be heard squealing in surprise.

“Halt, I say! How do I know that you two aren't Death Eaters in disguise?” asked Mars with mock pomposity.

“I don't know, do Death Eaters normally go around with bows in their hair like Mary and I?” asked a giggly voice Harry recognized as Heather Parkinson's.

“Well, I did say in disguise,” answered Mars.

The girls' only answer was more giggling. Mars said goodbye and reentered the

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classroom. The four up front grinned at Mars as he told them to retake their seats.

“Now, I can see many of you disapprove of my levity when discussing Voldemort. But I was just trying to show how silly your fears are about saying his name. Tom Riddle himself is certainly to be feared, but being scared of just his name is not only stupid, it helps him.

“I will not tolerate that kind of irrational behavior from my advanced class. By Friday, you are all to be able to hear his name without flinching. Don't look so worried, Pavarti; did you see him show up a minute ago? Do you think he would dare show his face anywhere that he knew Albus Dumbledore was?

“Now, if you thought that hearing his name was tough, just wait. I'm giving you all till the end of the fall term to be able to say his name in class, clearly, loudly, and on command. I cannot teach you to fight something if you are too terrified to even mention it. Class dismissed,” finished Mars crossly.

For the first time Harry could remember, no one stopped to chat with Mars on the way out of class.

For the next few days Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny spent a lot of time saying Voldemort's name to their classmates to help them pass Mars' test on Friday.

Wednesday morning Harry was eagerly walking to his Defense Against the Dark Arts Class. He had really enjoyed teaching so far; he was looking forward to today's lesson, the Flipendo spell. He wasn't sure why anyone would want to use this spell, but it was in his lesson plan. As he rounded the last corner before the classroom one of his students, Mark Evans, ran up to him.

“Harry! Oh, Harry, it's awful—you have to help us,” squeaked the terrified first year.

Harry calmed the boy and they hurried to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Inside a shocking scene met their eyes: all the first year students were bound

by snake-like ropes from their mouths to their knees, and standing behind them was Draco Malfoy, with an evil grin on his triumphant face.

“Some teacher you are, Scarhead! None of these miserable brats had any idea how to defend themselves,” he sneered.

Harry drew his wand with lightning speed and aimed it at Malfoy's heart. “Give me a reason, you son of a Hag!” Harry shouted.

Malfoy grimaced and pointed to Harry's right. He said matter of factly, “I think you have a visitor, Potter.”

Harry turned and saw Mars standing calmly next to him. Harry jumped back in surprise. “Mars, what's going on?” he cried.

“I appear to be interrupting a nice duel you've set up with Draco, here. Sorry to intrude, but I must. We have to start your lessons tonight, I'm afraid,” replied Mars.

“Huh? What—? Lessons? What do you mean?” stammered Harry. At that moment Malfoy and all of his students disappeared from the room.

“You're having a dream, Harry, and I have dropped in on it. I need you to get dressed, grab your wand, and meet me in the Common Room. Do you understand?”

“I'm dreaming, but you're real? How I am supposed to understand that?” asked Harry irritably.

“You'll wake in a second, Harry; just meet me in the Common Room.”

Harry jerked his head up. He was in his bed, and he could hear the other boys snoring. He looked around: no Malfoy, nor any first years, in sight. He sighed and relaxed; he had, indeed, been dreaming. But had Mars been real? How could that be? He'd been dreaming, he was sure of it. But Mars had said that he'd awake in a second, and he had.

Harry pondered for a few more minutes and decided it was worth getting dressed to see if Mars was really in the Common Room. His movements woke Ron, who looked up

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at Harry from his bed.

“Where are you going?” Ron croaked sleepily.

Harry told Ron about his dream, and Ron looked intrigued.

“Well, you never know with Mars, it could've been real. I'll go down with you, shall I? You can't be allowed to play the fool all by yourself,” said Ron cheerfully.

They dressed and headed downstairs, expecting to find the Common Room empty and have a good laugh. When they opened the door, Harry and Ron stopped dead in their tracks. Mars was standing in front of the fireplace, looking at them.

“I don't remember inviting you, Ron, but I guess I should have known better than to think that I could break you two apart.”

“What are you doing here?”

“How did you get in?”

“A password is a poor defense against intruders, Ron. You never know who's listening, sight unseen, when you say it aloud. As for your question, Harry, I've come to start your lessons, the ones I hinted at in my office weeks ago. I'm afraid one or two nights a week, the two of you aren't going to be getting any sleep,” answered Mars gravely. “Are you ready?”

Harry swallowed, nodded, and glanced at Ron. Ron looked scared for a moment and then he, too, nodded at Mars. Mars opened the painting and walked out; the two boys hurried to keep up with him.

“Aren't we being a bit obvious on our way to secret lessons?” whispered Harry as they walked down a staircase.

“Don't be silly, Harry. Do you think I can only hide us from Muggles? Just stay close to me.”

They stopped outside the door to Mars' office. “There are, of course, hidden wards that protect this door, boys, but both of you can open it without harm,” said Mars,

opening the door. He led them over to the large desk and they sat in the chairs, facing each other.

“We need to start with a few explanations and rules, because this is a very serious endeavor you're about to embark on.” Mars looked straight at Ron. “Ron, Harry and I are inescapably locked into this struggle, we have no choice. But you – ”

“Don't try to leave me out! I'm no coward, I've proved that many times,” said Ron fiercely. His hands balled into fists.

Mars' expression changed from somber to proud. “I don't think they breed cowards in your family, Ron. However, this will be a real change for the both of you. And you need to know the full extent of my plans before we go any further. There is still a way out until you take the final step.”

Ron and Harry looked at each other in confusion. Harry had no idea what Mars was talking about.

Mars opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a shallow stone basin, carved with runes around the edges, that Harry instantly recognized as Dumbledore's Pensieve. It was full of the familiar silvery substance that Harry knew was the stuff of memories. Mars looked at Harry.

“Have you told anyone about your prophecy, Harry?”

“What d'you mean?”

“I mean does Ron, or any of your other friends, know what it contained?”

“I thought you said it got smashed, Harry?” asked Ron.

“It did, Ron, but Dumbledore witnessed the prophecy when it was made and he showed me its telling with his pensieve there,” said Harry, pointing at the basin. “I didn't tell any of you because I knew it would be too upsetting. You know how much your mum and Hermione worry.” Harry felt very guilty for having hidden the truth from his friends. But then a thought struck him.

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“Does this mean that you know the prophecy Mars?” Harry asked.

“Yes, Harry, I know all about it. Professor Dumbledore rarely conceals information from me. Ron, don't be upset that Harry hid this from you, it's a most troubling revelation. Harry, Ron must now be told if he is to join you in learning how to stop Tom Riddle.”

“Wait a minute now. We are the ones who are going stop him? You mean me and Harry? Not you and Dumbledore?” asked Ron, looking confused.

“That's right, Ron. I know it sounds crazy, but this should help explain why it has to be Harry,” answered Mars. He raised his wand and prodded the silvery substance in the basin with its tip.

A figure rose out of the basin; Harry was expecting it, but Ron gasped in surprise. It was Sybil Trelawney, their fraud of a Divination teacher; she was dressed, as usual, in layers of shawls, and wore huge glasses that magnified her already large eyes. She spoke, not in her normal misty voice, but in a harsh and hoarse tone:

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies ...”

The slowly revolving Professor Trelawney sank back into the silver mass below and vanished.

Ron looked thunderstruck; his hands gripped his chair arms tightly and his eyes were as wide as Luna's. Harry had no idea what to say to his best friend, but Mars clearly did.

“Yes, Ron, that does mean that *only* Harry can completely vanquish Voldemort. No one else can, not the aurors, not me, not even Albus Dumbledore. I tried to defy the prophecy on the night of Bill and Fleur's wedding. He was in the warehouse that I blew

up, with only a few of his servants. I didn't want to risk waiting for the rest of the Donnies, in case I was spotted, so I called down a meteor swarm to demolish the whole block. There wasn't much but dust left, but Voldemort disappeared just before the swarm hit. There is no way he could have known I was there; I was foiled by the words of the prophecy.

“I am now going to teach Harry how to kill Tom Riddle; it's the only way.—I am going to teach him the Killing Curse, Avada Kedavra.”

Harry and Ron flinched.

Mars turned his powerful gaze on Harry. “Harry, do you trust Ron with your life? That is what you are risking by including him in your lessons with me. I can give him a memory charm and free him from this burden, but I will admit, having such a close and trusted friend along this dangerous path would be beneficial.”

Harry looked at Ron and again felt the horrible guilt of putting so many people he cared for in danger. In a shaky voice, he said to Ron, “When we thought Sirius wanted to kill me, you jumped in between us and told him that he'd have to kill you too. Do you still feel that way, mate?—because if you don't, I won't hold it against you.”

Ron answered, a tear glinting in one eye. “You know I do. After what we've been though – I'd never abandon you, no matter what the consequences.” He turned and stared into Mars' light blue eyes. “Just like Bill and Charlie have got your back, Mars, I've got Harry's.”

“I never doubted you for a second, Ron, but I had to make sure that you yourself made the decision. I only plan to teach you two the minimal amount of Dark Magic that it takes to learn the Killing Curse, and not one spell more. It pains me horribly to show anyone these awful curses, but the only other option is capitulation. If Harry doesn't kill Tom Riddle, than we have no future; nothing is more important than this cause! Do you both understand this?”

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Harry and Ron both nodded without hesitation.

“Then forgive me in advance for teaching you such horrible spells. If I could bear this burden for you, please believe that I would. It is dreadful to learn these arts, but much worse to teach them.” He sighed. “I do not, however, see any other way. We will not be the only ones to suffer before this is finished.” Mars' eyes swelled with tears. His heart looked to be breaking at the thought of instructing young wizards in the Dark Arts.

“The Cruciatus Curse is terrible; it attacks your nerves throughout the body, including your brain. Extended torture from it causes insanity and death.” Harry and Ron nodded; they both had seen Neville's parents in St. Mungo's. “There is only one legitimate reason to learn it: to use it as a stepping stone in learning the Killing Curse. You are to never use this spell once outside of our lessons – not even on Death Eaters. Got it?”

Harry and Ron nodded again.

“It was hard to find a suitable subject for you two to practice on—well, other than Snape, I suppose,” Mars winked.

Harry and Ron smiled in spite of their tension.

“I did, however, find something that we can test the spell on without feeling guilt or pity. This nasty critter does not feel pain. The torturing will just make it mad, so the better your spell, the more it will growl.”

“Growl? What is it?” asked Ron.

“Well, wizards are really superstitious about them, so I want to assure you before we go into the next room that there is nothing to worry about. He didn't come for any of us,” said Mars, as he stood up and walked to the right door on the far wall.

Harry had no idea what Mars meant, but assumed he would understand once they saw their target. He and Ron hurried after Mars. This room was even bigger than the office and seemed to have a complete alchemy lab; there were several tables, and at the back of the room was a large cage which housed an enormous black dog. The dog

immediately reminded Harry of the one he had seen on the cover of a book on Death Omens—but that would mean that this dog was—

“A GRIM? Are you mad, Mars?” shrieked Ron in panic.

“Relax, Ron, he didn't come for you or any of us. I captured him when he showed himself to this poor old witch in Hogsmead last week,” said Mars.

“You captured him? That's unheard of,” sputtered Ron.

“How did you know he was going to appear to the witch in Hogsmead?” asked Harry nervously.

“Let's just say I know a lot of things before they happen, Harry. I couldn't save her from dying of old age the next day, but I could snag this brute for you to practice on. Their true names are Barghests, and they're nasty even when they're not foretelling the deaths of their viewers, so keep away from his cage.”

“How did you capture it?”

“It wasn't easy, but that's not important now. What is important is that you two start to learn the Cruciatus Curse on him.”

They stood about fifteen feet from the cage. Mars explained, “To cast one of the unforgivable curses, you have to be in a certain mindset. It takes a great deal of anger, even hatred, inside you to gather the necessary negative energy to cast such a malicious curse.”

“That Lestrangle woman said that to cast an unforgivable curse, you really have to mean it and thoroughly enjoy what you are doing in order for it to work correctly. She said righteous anger wouldn't work for long,” said Harry.

“I'm not surprised she believes that. Bellatrix learned all of her Dark Arts from Riddle himself, Harry. She is as terrible as he, just not as clever. Giving in to the evil temptations that the Dark Magic contains is the easiest way to learn it, but we will not take that route. Righteous anger won't work, I agree, but a bloodthirsty desire for justice

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can power the spell. You must harden yourselves; you must remember *why* we need to harness these Dark Arts, and you must abandon pity when dealing with the Death Eaters. They are unreformable; they are *all* murderers and have caused untold suffering, including to those close to you both. Their cruelty is limited only by their abilities.”

Mars put his hands on their shoulders and looked down at them. Harry felt anger and hatred flow through his veins. Images of victims poured through his head; his heartbeat pulsed in his ears, and he tensed his grip on his wand.

“Remember when Bellatrix threatened to torture Ginny to death?” barked Mars.

“YES!” they both shouted angrily.

Mars released them, but the hatred stayed. Harry's vision tunneled onto the Barghest and he raised his wand.

“The wand movement is simple.” Mars raised his wand and pointed it at the Grim. “Crucio!” he shouted. The black dog immediately lunged against the cage, fangs bared, snarling loudly. Its eyes, full of malice, were fixed on Mars. Mars released the spell.

“You next, Harry. Remember, vengeance and justice for all the people this evil beast has sent to their deaths,” called Mars.

“Crucio!” cried Harry. He felt waves of animosity passing through him to his wand as the curse was cast. The Barghest hit the bars again in fury, fixing its gaze on Harry now. Its glare was so terrifying that Harry's concentration broke and his spell stopped.

“It's okay, Harry, you did great for a first try. This bad boy is a lot fiercer than most Donnies,” said Mars, gripped Harry's shoulder again. Harry's fear drained from him and his anger rose again.

He and Ron both tried the curse several times over the next five hours. After the sixth try Harry thought he was getting the hang of it. Ron was not doing as well, but on the last try the Grim went wild with anger, and Harry thought it was going to free itself from the cage.

“Excellent, Ron,” exclaimed Mars as he clasped Ron's shoulder. “You both have a foothold on the curse now. You know how it works and how it feels; next, you need to get yourselves in the proper mindset without my help. That will be the most important part of mastering the spell. The killing curse requires the same thought process, but your brain has to concentrate even harder and the somatic movements are trickier. Vengeance and justice! Brood on those subjects and how they relate to your thoughts about Voldemort and his followers until we practice again.”

Harry and Ron both nodded in agreement and followed Mars back out into his office. He walked up to his fireplace and pointed at a floo powder pot. “This fireplace can take you to any fireplace in the castle, but none of them can bring you here. Just say 'Gryffindor Common Room' when you use the powder and you'll be back in your tower. I'm afraid that it is about time to get up, so it's going to be a long day for you both.”

They both used the fireplace to get to the Common Room. Once there they decided to head down for breakfast, since they were already dressed.

“So I guess Mars is an empath?” asked Ron as they started down the staircase.

“A what?”

“Someone who can feel or transmit emotions. When he touched my shoulder, I really wanted to kill Lestrage,” answered Ron.

“Yeah, he did something like that before with me, and I think Hermione. He must be a Seer too, because how else would he have known when and where that Grim would be?” added Harry.

“You know, mate, I can't believe I'm saying this, but it looks like Loony Lovegood was more right about Mars than Hermione,” said Ron, shaking his head.

They were the first ones in the Great Hall and wasted no time in starting to eat. When Ginny and Hermione arrived a few moments later, they looked at Ron and Harry in surprise. “What's got into you two? I have never seen either of you so awake in the

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morning,” commented Hermione. The boys just smiled and kept eating.

The lack of sleep from the previous night soon caught up with Harry and Ron. They had been fine while eating and moving around, but as soon as Harry finished his class lecture and sat down at the desk, he started nodding off. He fought hard to cover it up, but Mary and Heather both teased him about snoring on their way out of class. Harry smiled despite himself.

Harry headed out to the courtyard to meet his friends for break, but waiting for him outside the classroom was Cho. She looked downcast at first, but when she saw Harry, her eyes lit up and she beamed at him as she approached. Harry noticed that despite her current happiness, her eyes were red and had deep shadows under them. He thought she must have been crying again.

“Oh, Harry, please don't walk away,” she begged.

“I wasn't going to, Cho; what's the matter?” asked Harry nervously.

When Cho reached him, she grabbed his arm, put one of hers though it and patted his arm with her other hand.

“The matter is that since school has started you've said less than ten sentences to me. On the train you said we could be like it was before,” she answered. “Why have you been avoiding me?”

Harry looked down at her pretty face and was surprised that she wasn't crying now. He wasn't sure how to explain to her that he now liked Ginny. In fact, he had just surprised himself by having that very thought.

For four years Ginny had fancied him so much that she could barely walk and talk around him. Harry had always felt awkward about her crush on him and treated her as nothing more than his best friend's kid sister who wanted to tag along. By the time Harry had decided he liked girls, it was Cho that he fancied, but it seemed that events had conspired to keep them apart. Now here was Cho fawning all over him, begging him to

see her again, and all he could think of was Ginny. Maybe Hermione did had a point about boys being stupid about their feelings?

“I haven't been avoiding you, Cho. I,—I've just been busy. Teaching that class for Mars is a lot of work,” said Harry with only partial truthfulness.

“There's no need to lie to me, Harry. I know you're seeing Ginny Weasley now. It's all over the school, you know?” said Cho in a surprisingly friendly voice.

“It is?” asked Harry, truly shocked. He figured if it was commonly known that he and Ginny were dating, it would have been nice for someone to have told him about it.

“Of course. You've stayed with her family the past four years, Harry. You are far too famous to hide something like that, but your new girlfriend can't be so jealous that she doesn't allow you to have friends, can she?”

“What? Of course I have friends.”

“Then help me with our Defense Against the Dark Arts homework tonight. I still wince horribly when people say that awful name. It reminds me that he killed Cedric.”

Harry knew he was stuck helping her now. She had played her Cedric card, and that always aroused his sympathy because he felt responsible for Cedric's untimely death. He then remembered that there was to be a prefect meeting this evening, and that his friends would have to attend it. It seemed like the perfect opportunity to help Cho without ditching his friends, and then to explain to her in private how he really felt.

“Okay,” said Harry. “Meet me in the library at seven. I'll help you then.”

“Good for you, Harry. You mustn't let Ginny boss you around just because she's your girlfriend. You're too young to be henpecked,” said Cho as she stood on her toes and kissed Harry on the cheek. She then let go of him and walked back up the corridor.

“Girlfriend? Henpecked?” said Harry to himself. Cho had him so bewildered that he forgot completely about being tired. He had already missed break, so he headed out to Hagrid's cabin to meet Hermione and Ron for their next class.

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Harry kept his study plans with Cho to himself. He didn't think there was any need to chance irritating Ginny about it. After dinner, Hermione left to meet Padma in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Mars had enchanted the door in that room to let his advanced students enter it any time they needed to practice or study. Ron, Harry and Ginny studied in the Gryffindor common room until it was time for the Weasleys to leave for the prefects meeting. Harry said good bye and then gave them a good head start before he left to meet Cho in the library.

Harry felt apprehensive and guilty about meeting Cho, although he really didn't know why. He told himself that Ginny would understand him helping other students with their assignments; she did it all the time; but he still felt bad about not informing her. Why should he, though? Even if the whole school thought they were going out, they really weren't, were they?

To add to his confusion, he was actually afraid of talking to Cho. She had been acting so weird lately that he really didn't want to be around her. He couldn't put his finger on why he felt this way, either. She had been perfectly friendly. But by the time he sat down next to Cho in the library Harry had worked himself into a real bundle of nerves.

After they had chatted for a few minutes, Cho pointed out that the library was a poor place to be saying You-Know-Who's name loudly over and over. Harry was still nervous just being around Cho, so this change in plans made him feel even more antsy, although her reasoning was sound. Cho suggested they use the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. That particular change of venue was actually welcome to Harry. Hermione would have gone to her prefects meeting by now, and it was quite likely that other students from the advanced class would be in the room practicing the same thing. Harry would probably end up helping everyone there, and it wouldn't look like he was doing anything alone with Cho. This revelation lifted Harry's spirits, and he quickly agreed with Cho's plan.

They left the library together, but Cho led him on a different route than he would normally have taken. He knew the way, although it was a bit longer; but it went near the Ravenclaw tower, so he decided Cho was simply used to walking this way.

After a few minutes Harry noticed that some of the magic torches weren't lit; the corridor was getting progressively darker. He never remembered seeing them out like this before, but he said nothing. The hallway had gotten quite dark when Cho stopped suddenly.

“Harry! Did you hear something crawling over there?” she asked.

“Where?” Harry peered into the darkness.

Cho threw an arm around Harry, holding him tightly around the waist. When she spoke she sounded scared. “Over there, Harry! It sounded horrible.”

“I didn't hear anything, but if you let go, I'll look at it.”

Cho released him and Harry walked towards the area she had indicated. He reached for his wand, but it wasn't in his waistband. He spun around to face Cho; she was pointing her wand at him and had his own wand in her other hand.

“Oh Harry, you're so predictable. All I had to do was get you away from your friends and that foul American. You always want to play the hero, don't you?” asked Cho, her eyes bulging in the dim light.

“What are you doing, Cho?” asked Harry, glancing around, trying to determine his options. He knew he had to keep her talking until he could think of something.

“Why, I'm killing you, of course,” she said in a happy voice that didn't match the strained look on her face.

“But why?” stalled Harry. He was running out of time.

“Because the Dark Lord ordered me to, silly. You've lived far too long, Harry Potter. Good-bye.”

Harry raised his arms protectively as she started to move her wand, but the

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incantation he heard was in a male's voice.

“Impedimenta!”

Cho was knocked off her feet and landed on the stone floor with a thud.

Harry looked down the corridor, trying to see who had saved him. To his horror, Snape's black-clad form stepped out of the shadows.

“Well, don't just stand there like an idiot, Potter; get those wands!”

Harry snapped out of his shock and snatched his and Cho's wands from the floor. Snape twirled his wand and thin cords shot from it, entwining Cho's body and gagging her.

“Now, why would your ex-girlfriend want to kill you?” asked Snape as he bent down to look closer at Cho.

“I don't know, sir,” answered Harry stiffly.

Snape was now prying her eyelids open and shining the light from his wand into her eyes.

“It looks like the Imperious Curse to me. How long has she been acting strangely?”

“Since the beginning of summer, I'd say. She went from never wanting to speak to me again to saying she missed me dreadfully inside of a week,” answered Harry.

“Well, that certainly fits in with my theory. Whomever was controlling her would want to be able to get her very close to you, Potter. I don't have her in any of my classes, else I would have recognized her condition right away.” Snape had stopped short of directly insulting Mars, but Harry knew exactly what he was implying.

“Mobilicorpus,” said Snape, and Cho floated into an upright position. She was now struggling vainly to escape from the coils.

“Come, Potter. We're going to see the Headmaster. Perhaps he can tell us who cursed her. And by the way, there's no need to thank me for saving your life yet again,” sneered Snape. Harry grimaced and followed Snape to Dumbledore's office.

Under normal circumstances Harry would have been quite amused when he heard the password to Dumbledore's office was now 'Canary Creams': they were a trick sweet invented by the Weasley twins. However, at this moment he was preoccupied by the latest attempt on his life. Cho had probably been suffering under the Imperious Curse for months. Just another innocent coming to harm because they knew him. Harry sighed miserably as he followed Snape and the floating Cho up the spiral escalator that led to Dumbledore's inner chambers.

Dumbledore examined Cho's face very closely for several minutes and then took out one of his odd silvery instruments. He sprinkled some blue powder into his left hand and walked back over to Cho. With his left hand in front of her face, he tapped his palm with the silver instrument and a blue smoke cloud rose in front of her face. Dumbledore peered through it for several seconds and then straightened.

“Yes, Severus; she is indeed under the Imperious Curse. Poor girl appears to have been fighting it for months,” said Dumbledore sadly.

Dumbledore pulled out his wand, waved it around her head several times, and said “Libertasio.” Cho's face contorted for a few seconds and then a green mist rose from her and floated upwards and dispersed. Cho's head dropped and she appeared to be unconscious. Dumbledore tapped her bonds with his wand, and they quickly unraveled. He guided her to an armchair, and Snape released her from his floating charm.

“Severus, would you please fetch Madam Pomfrey to look after Miss Chang?” asked Dumbledore.

“Of course, Headmaster,” answered Snape, scowling at Harry on his way out.

“I'm afraid we'll see more and more people under the influence of that curse, Harry,” stated Dumbledore.

“That powder and the silver rod. Did you need that to see she was controlled by the Imperious Curse?” asked Harry.

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The Headmaster nodded.

“Then how did Snape know just by looking at her?”

“That is what I am wondering at this very moment,” answered Dumbledore as he sat down behind his desk.

They sat in silence until the school nurse came to fetch poor Cho. Madam Pomfrey looked Harry over quickly and cleared him to leave before she revived Cho and led the confused seventh year back with her to the hospital.

Harry trekked back to Gryffindor tower, pondering the meaning of Dumbledore's last words to him.

Chapter Seventeen – Hermione's Very Bad Week



When Harry arrived at the Gryffindor Common Room he noticed Ron and Ginny looked very upset as they sat together in a corner instead of their usual place beside the fire. The worry on their faces made him temporarily forget his recent brush with death as he approached them.

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“Why the long faces? And where's Hermione?” he asked.

“She and Padma missed the prefect's meeting. Ester was furious,” answered Ginny.

Ron snarled at the mention of the Head Girl's name.

Ginny looked at her brother and gently patted her hand on his shoulder.

“She was having a real go at Hermione, called her all sorts of nasty things. And at the end of the meeting Ron, well – he told Ester to,” said Ginny who now changed her voice to a whisper, “to go jinx herself.”

Harry's face lit up and he smiled as he asked his best friend “Right in front of all the prefects mate?”

“Yeah. I was about to tell her where she could stick her wand, but then Hermione and Padma showed up,” answered Ron irritably.

“Ester wrote Ron up for his insults and Hermione and Padma for missing the meeting. Jason just sat there making sure he avoided hacking off Ester as usual, stupid git that he is. But this was Hermione's third reprimand, she's automatically suspended for the term,” said a dejected Ginny.

“Come off it, Mars won't let that happen. He canceled her last detention and that was before he was in charge of her,” suggested Harry.

“He's not in charge of the prefects. Ester knew better than trying to give her detention or having Snape dock points from Gryffindor so she nailed Hermione on something Mars couldn't reverse,” said Ron.

“Where is she then?” asked Harry.

As if on cue Hermione then entered the Common Room through the painting looking thoroughly miserable. Once she spotted the group she trudged over to them and plopped into a chair next to Harry.

“Spikes dragged me off to Professor McGonagall's office, even though Mars is supposed to be my Head of House now,” said Hermione in a very depressed voice. “I had

hoped that McGonagall would've given me some support or least be neutral, but she just lectured me more. She said 'I've *never* had to suspend a Gryffindor prefect before.', and then she told me off for cheating in Potions.”

“That wasn't cheating!” snarled Ron.

“I know,” agreed Hermione. “Ester confiscated my badge, and told me I would get it back next term if my Head of House thinks I deserve it.”

“Of course Mars will,” said Harry.

“I told you Harry, Mars has nothing to do with the prefects, anything to do with Gryffindor prefects is McGonagall,” said Ron.

“Even if she does okay it, I'm still on probation until summer term.”

Harry, Ron and Ginny all gave Hermione sympathetic rubs on her shoulder.

“We can't let her get away with this. You know that don't you Hermione?” said Ron.

“I know. She's gone too far I agree, but you can't just hex her openly Ron. Promise me that you won't,” demanded Hermione.

Ron remained silent.

“Look, we'll get even, but we have to be careful. Please?” said Hermione desperately as she stared up at Ron.

“All right, but it has to be good,” he said.

“Oh it will be,” replied Hermione darkly.

“Why did you miss the meeting?” asked Harry carefully.

“Padma and I finally had a breakthrough of understanding with the UAS. Just like Mars had predicted we suddenly got it. We were hopelessly lost and then wham. It was really quite exciting and we didn't mind the time until it was too late,” answered Hermione.

The conversation was then cut off by Lily flying across the room and landing on

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Ginny's arm. She was singing a quiet but very cheerful song.

"Lily, how did you get in here?" asked Ginny as she gently stroked the small bird.

"Doors can't stop her Ginny," answered Harry.

"But why is she in our Common Room now? She's never come up here before," stated Hermione.

Harry swallowed hard. He knew the news of Cho's attack must have reached Mars and that the American had sent Lily to watch him. Even at Hogwarts he was to be constantly monitored. Harry sighed and then spoke.

"Mars must have heard about Cho trying to kill me this evening and sent Lily to keep a closer watch on me," said Harry darkly.

His three friends flinched violently in alarm. Ron gaped so much Harry thought his jaw was going hit the floor.

Harry then explained to his now terrified looking friends about Cho being under the Imperious Curse, how she had gotten him to help her with homework, tricked him into being alone with her and lastly the dreadful experience of being saved by Snape. He also told them about Dumbledore's musing of Snape's instant prognosis of the curse.

"So that's why she wrote you those lovey-dovey letters this summer even though you had that blazing row with her last year?" asked Ron.

"Any why she cornered you on the train? I thought you looked terrified when she was kissing you," said Ginny who was now beaming at him.

The look of relief on Ginny's face was matched by his own. Just five minutes ago Harry would have sworn nothing could have countered his depression over the attack and Hermione's suspension. However, Lily's song and Ginny's warm smile had done just that. He wanted very much to reach over and hug her. Hermione though interrupted his train of thought.

"Snape recognized the curse right away you said?" asked Hermione.

“Huh? Oh yeah. He just looked at her eyes and said it was the Imperious Curse,” answered Harry switching his gaze from Ginny.

“But Dumbledore had to use a magic rod and some powder to tell? And Mars saw her twice a week and never noticed?” said Hermione suspiciously.

“That doesn't sound likely.” added Ron.

They chatted for another hour about the days events and then the three six years had to head over to the Astronomy Tower for their weekly observations of the heavens. Harry and Ron were so tired that they barely made it through the class and instantly fell asleep on their beds still fully clothed when they returned to their dorms.

While Harry would never describe Double Potions as a fun experience, Thursday's class was uncommonly dreadful. Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson constantly goaded Hermione about being suspended and of course Snape ignored their taunting. Hermione somehow managed to tune them out, but Harry was sure at any moment Ron was going to hex them and get himself expelled. Ron, however, managed to keep his temper and Harry breathed a sigh of relief when the class ended.

Transfiguration did seem to cheer Ron up a bit. While McGonagall was still frosty to Hermione, the day's subject was close to Ron's heart: They were to start making their own Wizard Chess sets. The students picked out the material they were to use and then started transfiguring the pieces. By the end of class Ron was glowing with pride as he presented the three pieces, two knights and a rook, he had finished to Professor McGonagall.

“Excellent work Mr Weasley. You and Miss Patil had outstanding results today. Ten points each for Gryffindor and Ravenclaw,” said McGonagall proudly.

Hermione sighed. She too had finished three pieces and in Harry's opinion they were as good as Padma's or Ron's, but apparently McGonagall was still angry with her. Hermione however, showed no signs of bitterness towards Ron getting such rare praise in

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Transfiguration. She in fact congratulated Ron heartily after they left class and headed for the Great Hall.

While they were eating dinner at the Gryffindor table Hermione peered over Harry's shoulder with a cross look on her face.

“Why is she coming over here?” she asked nastily.

Harry and Ron turned their heads to look behind them and saw Marietta Edgecombe headed directly towards them. She stopped when she was right next to Harry and squeezed in beside him. Hermione continued to glare at her.

“Harry, I've come with a message from Cho,” said Marietta.

“Oh. Is she okay?” he asked.

“Yes, she is recovering nicely. Cho should be back in class on Monday, but she would like you to visit her on Saturday if you could. She wants to apologize in person.”

Harry was still nervous about being around Cho, but how could he turn her down after what she had just been through.

“Yeah, I'll come by. I don't blame her for what happened.”

“Thanks Harry. She really feels horrible about everything. She'd like for Ginny to come with you, if she will,” said Marietta as she stood.

“But just Ginny,” she added as she glared back at Hermione before she walked over to the Ravenclaw table.

“Why does she want you to come?” asked Ron as he looked at his sister.

Harry wondered the same thing as Ginny shrugged.

That evening was the first Harry could remember that Ron was more eager to do their homework than Hermione. She seemed to doing her best to not seemed depressed about her suspension, but Harry could tell it bothered her deeply. She just wasn't used to being in trouble like he and Ron were.

On Fridays were Harry's favorite classes. Double Charms in the morning, then

would come the class he taught and finishing the week was Defense Against the Dark Arts. Apparently the advanced class took Mars' assignment very seriously as only Hannah Abbot, Zacharias Smith and Michael Corner flinched when they heard Voldemort's name spoken. Normally failing to complete an assignment would draw loads of extra homework from Mars, but he seemed to be in a good mood and merely told the three to try harder over the weekend.

Mars then split the class into sections as he had earlier alluded. Harry was to be by himself and work one on one with Mars, Padma and Hermione were to continue studying Mars' UAS and the rest of the class would form the third group. Ron and Neville were selected to lead the largest group in defense exercises each day. Mars warned them that he expected both to know the subject matter before class every class. Neville looked both proud and nervous when given this first ever leadership responsibility.

Saturday for Harry, Ron and Ginny was spent mostly on Quidditch. In two weeks they would face Slytherin and Ron was risking no chances of being unprepared. He drove the team quite hard and they seemed to be responding very well to his new plays and strategies. After practice all three were too tired to do any homework no matter how much Hermione nagged them.

Late in the afternoon Ginny reminded Harry that they had promised to visit Cho in the hospital. Harry was still apprehensive about seeing her, but a promise was a promise he told himself.

When they arrived, Madam Pomfrey led them over to Cho and told them they had only twenty minutes, which was more than enough in Harry's opinion. When Cho saw them she immediately sat up and looked excited, but didn't say anything until the nurse had left the room.

“Harry, Ginny. Come close, quickly,” demanded Cho as she scooted over and made room for them to sit on her bed.

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Harry really did not want to get that close to her, but Ginny immediately walked over and sat next to Cho so Harry decided to comply with her request.

“First off, I am so so sorry about what happened Harry. This awful red headed wizard cursed me as I was walking over to Mandy Brocklehurst's house and I was totally under his control. I tried to fight him, especially when he ordered me to get close to you and then kill you,” said Cho who was now unsurprisingly crying. “But he was too strong for me, oh please forgive me Harry.”

She sniffed and continued.

“But I'm sure you know all that. There is something else though, something that I didn't tell even Dumbledore,” whispered Cho as she leaned ever closer to them. “Snape had been following me for over a month before I-I attacked you Harry. Oh Harry, I'm so sorry!” She now broke down into sobs.

Harry could see how miserable she felt, and he knew he should put his arm around her. He still didn't want to touch her though, especially with Ginny in the room. Ginny however, flashed him a sharp look, like he was being very insensitive for not comforting Cho, so he went ahead and put his arm tentatively around her shoulders. Cho immediately buried her head in his shoulder and began to cry even harder. After a few seconds she spoke with a breaking voice.

“Snape knew! He knew I was under You-Know-Who's control, but he didn't tell anyone or try to stop me. I think he wanted me to attack you so he could save you and make himself look good.”

“And make Mars look bad,” added Ginny darkly.

Harry nodded and thought, “No wonder that gargoyle knew Cho's condition immediately.”

“Thank you both for coming, I know you didn't have to, it meant a lot,” Cho said while still crying. “Don't trust Snape, either of you.”

“What are you two doing on that bed?” shrieked Madam Pomfrey, who had just reentered the room.

Harry and Ginny leaped up with lightening speed.

“Why is she crying?” demanded the nurse. “How dare you upset a patient in this hospital! Out!”

The nurse looked as upset as Harry had ever seen her, so he and Ginny rushed out without even saying goodbye to Cho.

On Sunday, a mountain of homework awaited Harry, Ron and Ginny. They started working right after breakfast and were still not done at dinner time. Hermione however, had finished her work in the morning and spent the rest of the day knitting elf clothes and giving the three of them her I-told-you-to-study-yesterday look. Finally at nine Ron slammed down his quill with satisfaction.

“All done!” he said turning to look at Hermione. “See, we finished even with the long Quidditch practice.”

“So you're all prepared to lead your group in the new Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson tomorrow are you?” asked Hermione in her maddeningly superior tone.

A panicked look struck Ron's face. He obviously was not prepared.

“Neville, did you talk to Mars about the lesson tomorrow?” asked Ron.

Neville walked over from one of the tables to answer him. “Yeah, I went to his office while you were at Quidditch practice.”

At this pronouncement Hermione raised her look of superiority to new heights as she stared at Ron.

Ron did his best to ignore her and fixed his gaze on Neville. “Well, what did he say the lesson was going to be on?”

“Spacing.”

“What?”

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“Spacing.”

“Neville, he has got to have said more than that. The spacing of what?” asked Ron sounding annoyed.

“Well it was something to do with defense I know,” answered Neville hopelessly.

“How are we suppose to lead the class in the lesson knowing just that?” said Ron hotly.

“I’m not sure actually. I’m rather worried, Mars does tend to get upset when you’re not prepared,” said Neville nervously and then he went back to his table.

“That’s an understatement,” added Ginny darkly.

“Ron, you’re going to have to see Mars tonight. You can’t mess up on your first day,” suggested Harry.

“I know, but it’s after nine, by the time I finish talking to him it will be past curfew.”

“Just use his fireplace to get back Ron,” interjected Ginny and Hermione nodded in agreement before she went back to her knitting.

Harry and Ron looked at each other in surprise. Neither had thought that any other students were familiar with using Mars’ fireplace to get back to Gryffindor Tower.

“C’mon Ron, I’ll go with you. I have a few questions for Mars myself,” offered Harry.

As the boys made their way to Mars’ office they noticed Filch’s foul cat Mrs Norris was following them.

“We’re allowed to be out you stupid fur ball. Go ahead and fetch Filch, I’m sure he really wants to see Mars,” said Harry nastily at her. The cat sped off.

They knocked on the office door and heard Mars tell them to enter. When Harry opened the door he saw Mars staring intently at the largest Galaxy Globe he had ever seen. It was at least three times the size of his own. The boys walked over to him and

stood silently for a minute or so watching him study the stars. Eventually Harry nudged Ron in the ribs in an effort to make him ask Mars about the lesson.

“Er – Mars, about the lesson tomorrow,” said Ron tentatively.

“The one you are supposed to be leading and will know all about *before* class starts?”

“Yeah that one. I'm sorry I left it so late ...,” Ron starting saying weakly.

“That's okay, Neville managed to be early and I doubt he remembers anything I said.”

“He doesn't,” agreed Harry with a laugh.

Mars smiled and then led them over to the lab. Harry braced himself expecting to see the Grim, but its cage was nowhere in sight.

“What happened to the Grim?” asked Ron nervously.

“He's out of the way for now. Damn thing is so evil I couldn't stand it staring at me. I kept wanting to kill it,” answered Mars.

At the far end of the lab were two strange looking cylinders. They were twenty feet apart, about six feet high and looked like mini Roman marble pillars.

“We will be using devices like these to hone your reflexes. Each will cast stinging charms at the target or targets designated, at the speed selected until they reach a certain number of shots or until the target hits the pillar with its own charm,” said Mars then he demonstrated how it worked on Ron.

He touched the pillar with his hand, pointed his wand at Ron and said “Two shots, slow speed.”

He told Ron to get ready to block the spell and then removed his hand. Instantly a bright yellow bullet like light flew out of the pillar and straight at Ron. He was too surprised to remember to try and block it. So it nailed him.

“Ouch!” he said loudly, but then immediately readied his wand to block the second

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spell. This time when the bullet of light came at him he managed to cast the shield spell and block the charm.

“Very good Ron. You'll want to get used to these things before class tomorrow. I have set up six of them in my classroom's lab,” said Mars.

“But it doesn't have a lab does it?” asked Harry.

“It does now. I told you I need a lot of space,” answered Mars again grinning.

Harry and Ron practiced with the pillars for over two hours. It was a lot of fun and at the end they even talked Mars into taking on both pillars at once when they were set on very fast speed. His sword focus whirled around with incredible velocity. He easily deflected the charms as he glided catlike through his combat maneuvers. After blocking forty or so shots Mars deflected the charms back at the pillars to deactivate them.

“That was brilliant!” offered Harry as they walked back towards the door to the office.

“I can't believe we actually get to do this as a school assignment,” said Ron excitedly.

“It's excellent training, just because you are great at casting spells, doesn't make you a good dueler. Balance, reflexes and even instincts are almost as important,” said Mars wisely as he opened the door. He walked two steps forward and then stopped suddenly.

Harry and Ron stepped around Mars and tried to see what had alarmed him. They now froze themselves.

Dobby, the Malfoy's freed house-elf, was walking across Mars' office and like when Harry last saw him, he was wearing around twenty of Hermione's knitted hats, multiple scarves and enough socks to open his own shop.

“Stop!” ordered Mars.

Dobby however appeared to have actually sped up a bit as he neared the door.

“I know you heard me, now stop! Dobby's your name isn't it?” asked Mars.

Dobby finally stopped and slowly turned to face them. His eyes lit up as they saw Harry.

“Harry Potter sir. Dobby did not expect to see sir while he was filling in for Winky, oh what a surprise and honor it is to see Harry Potter again,” said Dobby as he was rushing to Harry's side.

“Hold it right there,” said Mars threateningly. His wand was out and pointed at Dobby. The elf instantly froze and looked terrified.

“It seems that you're old friends with Harry here, but before you start reminiscing you need to answer my question,” said Mars sternly.

Dobby looked more scared than ever as he cringed looking up at Mars. He did manage to squeak out, “Yes, I am called Dobby, Master Mars, sir.”

“Now that you are answering my questions, Dobby, there is no need to be scared. I would like the four of us to go sit at my desk while I ask you a few more things,” said Mars as he put his wand away.

“But Dobby has many chores to complete –”

“They can wait for now, Dobby. I have never had to use my wand to make a house-elf working for me listen before and I want to know why I had to with you,” interrupted Mars as he started heading for his desk.

Dobby gulped and followed gloomily.

“Mars, Dobby is a bit odd for a house-elf you know. He didn't mean to be rude,” said Harry as he and Ron caught up to Mars.

“Don't worry Harry. I'm not going to get your friend into any trouble, but I know he's hiding something. I can see it in his eyes. As soon as he tells me he'll be free to leave.”

“Dobby's working for you Mars? Not Hogwarts?” asked Ron.

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“Just until tomorrow. Winky's taking a week off to see her sister in Bolton,” answered Mars.

Both Ron and Harry stopped and gawked at the American.

“You hired Winky?” asked Harry incredulously.

“I had to. She was a real sad sack. I knew I had to cheer her up or she might just pass away. I told her Barty Crouch would want his long time house-elf to regain her honor. Her family had served his for decades and it was time for her to make up for her mistakes,” said Mars. “But she had to agree to my terms. She gets a salary and vacations. Oh and she had to learn to cook Tex-Mex. I am starving over here.”

Harry and Ron exchanged confused looks then continued following Mars.

The wizards sat down on the chairs around the desk. Dobby remained standing, still looking very nervous.

“Dobby, take a seat,” said Mars as he pointed his wand at one of the desk chairs. Its seat was raised so that Dobby would be able to see over the desktop.

The elf climbed into it and looked happily at Mars. “Like when I first met Harry Potter sir, I knew of your greatness, but not your goodness. Who could have thought? Dobby sitting at the same table, well desk actually, with the great Wizards Mars, Wheezy and Harry Potter?”

Tears of joy flowed from the elf's eyes and he blew his nose loudly on one of his scarves.

Mars looked dumbfounded. Apparently he had never seen anything like Dobby before. He turned his head and gazed questioningly at Harry.

Harry shrugged and said, “I told you he was a bit odd.”

“Yeah, he's always like this,” added Ron nodding.

Mars shook his head a bit and then stared straight into Dobby's large eyes.

“Dobby, it is very difficult to tell me a lie and even if you manage I'll know it

immediately. Now tell me why in the world are you wearing all those hats, socks and scarves?"

Dobby looked like he was struggling to move his eyes away from the gaze of Mars, but he obviously couldn't. After a few tense seconds he squeaked, "Now that Dobby has his freedom sir, he likes to wear clothes. He spends most of his wages on them."

"While I know you are being truthful Dobby, you are not answering my question," said Mars as he still stared at Dobby.

"Miss Hermy made them. She is the great Harry Potter's best friend after his Wheezy," answered the elf.

Mars jerked his head up and cocked it slightly. He looked quite confused. He then gazed at Harry and Ron. "Miss Hermy?"

Ron answered him chuckling, "He means Hermione."

Harry snickered softly. He and Ron both enjoyed teasing her about the name that Hagrid's little brother, the giant Grawp, called her.

Mars looked back at Dobby. "But why would she knit so many clothes for you, Dobby?"

The elf rocked himself in the chair and said nervously, "Dobby's not sure they were all meant for him."

"What *are* you sure of then?" asked Mars angrily.

"Mars, don't be cross with him. He just doesn't want to say anything bad about Hermione," interjected Harry.

"Why would he have to do that in answering my question? The knitting job doesn't look completely horrible," said Mars.

Harry looked at Ron nervously.

Ron swallowed and then spoke up. "Hermione has been knitting clothes for the house-elves for over a year. She leaves them hidden under rubbish hoping that the house-

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elves pick them up accidentally when they're cleaning.”

“Why would she want to trick them into picking up clothes that she knitted?” said Mars.

Harry had no idea why Mars didn't already understand what Hermione was up to, but he decided to tell him bluntly. “Well, she wants to set them free by giving them clothes.”

“Are you sure that's what she was planning?” asked Mars.

“Yeah, she told us on the first night last year,” answered Ron.

Harry nodded.

“And she wasn't joking about it?”

“No,” said Harry and Ron.

Mars' eyes grew wide, a smile started to form on his lips and then he broke into the loudest hardiest laugh Harry had ever heard. He bent forwards as he cackled and beat one of his fists on the desk.

Harry and Ron exchanged confused looks.

“Mars, I don't see what's so funny. Hermione's got the house-elves too scared to clean Gryffindor Tower, so poor Dobby, who's already free, has to do it himself each night,” said Harry trying his best not to sound cross.

“Oh Harry, that's not why the other house-elves avoid the tower I can assure you,” said Mars who was still trying to quit laughing. “They,” he inhaled greatly, “they most likely avoid it because Hermione offended them. That's right isn't Dobby?” asked Mars in much kinder voice than he had been using with the elf.

“Yes, Master Mars sir, they finds the clothes insulting. They don't know Miss Hermy like Dobby does.”

“Just when I was thinking Hermione was the most clever young witch I had ever met, and this comes to my attention,” said Mars as he shook his head. “I never figured

she could be such a bonehead like this.”

He smiled at the boys.

“Bonehead? What do you mean?” asked Ron.

“Do you really think a house-elf would be freed if it just picked up clothes lying around? I mean that's ridiculous, how do you think they do your laundry?” asked Mars.

“Yeah,” said Harry and Ron nodding with a look of enlightenment on their faces.

“Besides, she isn't the master at Hogwarts, Professor Dumbledore is. Only the master or a member of his or her family can free them. You can't just waltz up to anyone's house-elf, hand them a scarf and say off you go partner. I can't believe she ever thought that would work,” said Mars.

Now that Harry thought about it, he realized how implausible the idea really was. He just wasn't use to Hermione making mistakes like this.

“This won't get Miss Hermy into no troubles will it?” asked Dobby nervously.

“Nothing worse than an extra lesson Dobby, but tell me. Why do you say Ron and Harry's last names and not Hermione's?” asked Mars.

Harry turned and looked at the elf. The same thought had just occurred to Harry.

“It's just that the other house-elves, they don't like Miss Hermy much. They says very mean things and uses her name just awful,” said Dobby sadly.

“Like how?” asked Ron.

“Well Mr Wheezy sir, they says Granger instead of ... in place of ... well, dung,” said Dobby and then he stood up and beat his head against the chair back three times.

“She really has upset them hasn't she?” stated Mars.

“If she finds that out, she'll go spare,” said Ron.

“I know it will be tough Ron, but we have to help her understand how the house-elves really feel. Her self-righteousness is a big weakness and if we let her go on thinking she is helping, the shock that they really hate her will be even worse,” said Mars

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somberly.

“Fine, you deliver the news that the house-elves she loves so much use her name in the place of crap when they swear, but leave me out of it. You don't know her temper Mars,” said Ron waving his hands in front of him.

“You're not getting out of this Ron. I expect you two and Ginny to help me. Make sure that y'all are up at one in the morning tomorrow night. I'll give Hermione plenty of homework, so you don't have to worry about her. We have to do this guys, it may seem mean, but it would be worse without our help. Y'all go ahead and use the fireplace to get back to your tower. Dobby, you can finish your chores now,” said Mars.

Dobby headed out the door and Harry and Ron used the floo powder to go the Gryffindor Common Room and then went straight to bed. Harry sighed when he thought of the coming confrontation. Hermione was still upset about being suspended. Now being told that her last name was being used as a profanity by the the house-elves she was so fond of might just break her heart.

Neither Harry nor Ron were in any mood to get up the next morning. The late night training session had been fun at the time but they were now paying for the lack of sleep. They were both still drowsy when they sat at the Gryffindor Table for breakfast, but their energy returned as they related the tale of the practice pillars.

Ron was especially exuberant in their descriptions. After a few minutes of listening to the excitement building Harry began to feel a little left out. He knew that while Ron, Ginny and the others would be playing with the pillars, he would be working on some project by himself. Hermione also would be excluded from the fun, but she didn't seem to mind. Harry figured that learning Mars' UAS was probably exciting to her even though it bored the pants off he and Ron.

Hermione did look much happier today, but Harry feared whatever Mars had planned for her in class and he worried even more about the confrontation that Mars was

setting up for late that night. She had been having a very rough time lately and the cause of freeing the house-elves meant very much to her. He really wished that he had spoke up with his concerns last night when they were discussing the subject, but Harry just couldn't convince himself to argue with Mars at the time.

All these concerns had Harry heading to Defense Against the Dark Arts filled with trepidation. Once he arrived at the classroom Mars greeted everyone brightly and winked at Harry and Ron. Mars then had all the students, sans Harry, Hermione and Padma, follow Ron and Neville into the newly added lab which was reached by a door on a wall that should have led to the outside the castle. It instead opened into the lab and Harry could hear the pupils oohing and awing as they entered the room for the first time.

The plan for today was to have Harry learn the reverse transfiguration charm. It was quite a complex spell and Harry was assigned to check out three books from the library, including one from the restricted section. He sat at a table and unpacked all of his books, his scrolls, quills and ink bottles. When he finished Harry leaned back in the chair and heard cheerful laughing and occasional squeals of those hit by the stinging charms in the next room. He sighed and wished he could be in there with them.

Mars reentered the classroom from the lab and headed over to Harry's table. He apparently could tell that Harry wanted to be with the others because he spoke up immediately.

"I know you really want to join the fun don't you?" asked Mars. Harry nodded in response. "Well, we can always start the reverse transfiguration charm some evening this week. Go ahead, pack up your things and join them."

Harry thanked him and started putting his items back into his bag. Mars meanwhile had walked over to Padma and Hermione who were drawing geometric shapes on the blackboard.

"Miss Granger," said Mars sharply. Harry, Hermione and Padma all did a small

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double take because Mars generally called students by their first names. “Which curve would you use in the wand movement for a tearing charm on say November 3rd of next year?”

At first Hermione looked stumped by the question, but then she turned to the board and marked circles with her wand on two of the ellipses. She looked at the constellation maps that were on the wall, said something to herself and then looked at Mars.

“Because Jupiter and Saturn are at these locations,” she used her wand to light up two spheres on the constellation maps. “And the tearing charm is an evocation you would use an S-curve.”

Mars looked at the map and shook his head. “I agree that if the planets were at the places you've highlighted, an S-curve would be called for in an evocation, but your plotting is completely off for next November, these positions would be for June. The planets should be here.” Mars jabbed his wand at the map and the spheres moved to different constellations. “That would call for a French-curve wouldn't it? An S-curve? You would be lucky if the charm didn't reflect back and hit you. Good thing it was such a weak spell, don't you agree?”

Hermione immediately looked at her markings on the ellipses and then at a table she had in one of her books. After a few seconds she lifted her head and her face bore the look of recognition on it.

“I see where I got mixed up,” she said in a disappointed voice.

“And when you're dealing with the powerful spells that I will be teaching you Miss Granger, any mix up can be fatal. I expect you to be much better prepared for Friday. Do you understand?” asked Mars in what Harry thought was a very mean tone.

Hermione managed to squeak out a weak “Yes”. She looked quite disappointed.

“Miss Patil,” said Mars sternly. Padma jumped as she said “Yes.”

“I hope you do better with your chance,” said Mars. He then preceded ask a similar question of her, but with a different spell and date. Padma worked though it the same way as Hermione had, but Mars declared her answer correct. Padma smiled proudly.

“Very nice Padma. I expect you both to be perfect when we try a few of these techniques on Friday. I don't want any excuses either. I would hate to think I made a mistake when I chose the two of you to study such an advanced method.

“C'mon Harry lets see how Ron and Neville are doing.”

Once Harry and Mars had made it into the noisy lab, Mars pulled him into a corner and spoke quietly.

“I know that was mean, but I had to make sure Hermione stays up late studying tonight. She won't like doing poorly in class and I imagine she will take the last thing I said as a personal challenge. I'll apologize to her tonight after we settle the house-elf clothes issues,” said Mars.

There were twelve pillars in the lab and the students were taking them on in many variations. Two pupils versus a single pillar, one student two pillars, two on two, three on two and so on. Ron kept yelling at students who were teamed up to watch their spacing. Harry could see why, several of them actually stung their own teammate instead of the pillar.

When Harry first joined in his thoughts were still on Hermione, but as soon as he got stung, and subsequently teased about it, his mind was focused on the game. By the end of the double period it was very apparent that he was the best dueler.

At lunch Hermione wolfed down her food and then said she was off to the library to study her star tables. After she had left, Harry and Ron explained to Ginny what had happened between Hermione and the house-elves and told her of the planned meeting late that night.

“Well I agree that when Hermione finds out what they think of her it might just

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break her heart. But Mars is right, we need to take care of this now before it gets worse and we need to do it while her best friends are around her. Can you imagine how she would feel if they told her off and she found out what they used her name for in front of Ester or Pansy?” said Ginny.

Harry and Ron both agreed. Harry had never considered that possibility. As he and Ron walked outside to Hagrid's cabin Harry swore to himself that he would never again doubt the wisdom of Mars.

The rest of the day was still very tense for Harry. He barely paid attention in Care of Magical Creatures and after he finished dinner it's doubtful that he could have named a single food that he had eaten. While he knew that they were doing the right thing with Hermione, he still worried about her feelings. She had never taken being wrong very well, and luckily it rarely happened. This however was so important to her and she had turned out to be so spectacularly wrong that the possible repercussions were downright scary.

That evening Hermione was studying by herself at the table nearest Harry's Galaxy Globe. There were Astronomy and Spell Theory books piled near her and many scrolls of her class notes dotted the table. She had worked very hard all evening and as the time neared midnight Harry was reminded of how tired she had looked in their third year when she was using a time turner to attend two classes at simultaneously. He had sworn not to doubt Mars again so he tried to think positive thoughts and did his best to look busy until Mars arrived.

He then reached over and nudged Ron awake for the third time.

“Wha?” said Ron as he head jerk up.

“You'll make Hermione suspicious if she sees you sleeping out here,” warned Harry.

“Nah, she's too caught up in that UAS rubbish,” answered Ron who promptly started snoozing again.

Apparently Ron was correct because for the next hour Hermione never looked beyond her table. Then at precisely 1AM the painting of the Fat Lady opened and in walked three house-elves and one very tall wizard. Harry recognized two of the elves, Winky and Dobby. Dobby was still wearing all of Hermione's knitted clothes, but Winky appeared very different from the last time Harry had seen her. She wore a hat, with holes for her large ears, a pretty blouse and a skirt. All were the same shade of red. She and her clothes were no longer filthy, but sparkling clean and when she walked it was not the drunken stumble Harry had become accustomed to. Harry had never seen the third elf before, but it was wearing the normal uniform of a tea towel with the Hogwarts crest.

Ginny sat up straight in her chair and turned her gaze to Hermione. Harry nudged Ron awake who mumbled complaints until he saw the red robes of Mars pass him. He then instantly awoke and also fixed his eyes on Hermione. Hermione herself was still oblivious to the new arrivals who had walked up within a few feet of her table. After a tense pause of a few seconds Mars coughed to get her attention.

Hermione looked up from her books. "Oh," She said in surprise as she looked over the three house-elves.

"Hermione, I'm assuming you know Dobby and Winky here," said Mars as he gestured at the two elves. Dobby smiled and bowed deeply to Hermione, while Winky merely nodded her head in recognition. "This last rascal is Soupy. He's been the head house-elf at Hogwarts for the past thirty-five years."

Hermione didn't acknowledge the introductions. She was intently staring at Dobby and all the clothes she had knitted that were now piled onto his head, neck and feet.

"We've come to speak to you about the clothes you have been leaving out for the house-elves," said Mars plainly. Soupy and Winky both grimaced at mention of the clothes.

Hermione's look now changed from piqued to defiant. She fixed her gaze straight

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on the Hogwarts head house-elf.

“So are you here to complain about the shortage of workers now that so many house-elves have been freed? Or perhaps your budget's a bit short because you actually have to pay your staff for their hard work?” asked Hermione confidently.

Dobby hid his face in his hands while Winky crossed her arms and shook her head in disgust. Soupy however rolled his eyes, turned his head up and looked at Mars.

“Just as Soupy predicted. Miss *Granger* is as insulting and arrogant as ever. Soupy is only meeting her once, but once is enough to know,” squeaked the head elf. The way he had pronounced Granger left no doubt in Harry's mind that the elves really now used Hermione's last name as profanity.

Winky then shook one of her small fingers at Hermione and said, “You is a bad witch Miss, a very bad witch. Before you insults my old family and now you insults all the house-elves at Hogwarts. They all hates you now Miss *Granger*!”

“Hate me?” asked Hermione in alarm.

“Winky!” said Mars sternly.

“That's not true, Winky. Dobby don't hate Miss Hermy.”

Hermione blinked twice at Dobby calling her Hermy, but she recovered quickly. “Thank you Dobby. I knew I would upset some of the reactionaries.” Said Hermione while giving Soupy a nasty look. “But also I know all those house-elves whom I helped will one day rejoice in their freedom.” Hermione looked quite smug after she said this.

“You sees Master Mars? You sees? Like Soupy says before, Miss *Granger* is all insults and no brains,” said Soupy. He and Winky broke into odd laughing fits.

“Now Soupy, you and Winky promised me to be civil,” said Mars.

“We said we is if she is. She's not civil, just stupid,” said a giggly Soupy. Winky again joined the head house-elf in snickering.

“What is he talking about, Mars?” asked an annoyed Hermione.

“I had hoped they would've been more helpful today. That's the sign of a good house-elf you know,” said Mars. Winky and Soupy both winced at the criticism. “I fear, however, that you have insulted them so badly that it is going to be a real chore to make amends.”

“That's all right. I am quite willing to take the abuse. It's worth it knowing that all those elves have been set free,” answered Hermione.

Winky and Soupy again snickered.

Hermione looked crossly at them.

“Hermione darlin', what makes you think that any elves have been set free?” asked Mars patiently.

“I've been leaving out clothes that I've made for them each night and by the next morning they're always gone. You did say you came to speak to me about it didn't you?”

“Yes, but I had hoped that by now you would have realized your folly. You leave your laundry for them don't you? Why would clothes that you made be any different?” asked Mars.

“But these clothes were *for* them,” insisted Hermione.

“And you think yourself the master of Hogwarts do you?” asked Mars. Soupy and Winky started to giggle again, but a sharp look from Mars halted the laughing.

Hermione's face was perplexed. She looked at all the clothes Dobby was wearing again and then said angrily, “Dobby's been taking all the clothes so the others haven't been freed, hasn't he?”

Dobby cringed at the accusation and then shook his head.

“No Hermione,” said Mars sadly. “Dobby took all the clothes because none of the other house-elves will come to Gryffindor Tower. They are deeply offended at your hopeless attempt to free them against their will. He is the only house-elf at Hogwarts that I wouldn't have to force to enter this Common Room.”

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“Hopeless?” squeaked Hermione.

“Yes. You are a guest to these elves, not their master. You could no more free them than Harry could have freed Dobby from the Malfoys by handing the elf a sock himself. Remember he had to trick Lucius Malfoy into doing it.

“You have no authority or power over them Hermione. I'm afraid that the only thing that you have accomplished is to make all of them, except for Dobby, hate you,” answered Mars somberly.

“But,” said Hermione as her lip slightly wobbled, “I was only trying to help them.”

Soupy and Winky both sneered at her objection.

“I know Hermione, but you don't appear to have thought it out very well. It seems your otherwise exceptional intelligence has been blinded by an equally impressive self-righteousness. You can't expect them to appreciate your intentions when you try to deceive them into doing something you want and they fear.

“You've also picked a very poor place to recruit elves to your way of thinking. None are abused at Hogwarts, they have many others elves to mingle with and there is more work to be done here than about any other place in Britain. It's almost like heaven to them.”

Soupy smiled broadly.

“But they're not compensated for their hard work, they just toil all day. They're only happy because they are brainwashed. It's horrible,” objected Hermione.

“You no longer reside in the muggle world Hermione, you must leave its logic behind. They are creatures of magic not humans. Their deepest desire is to serve us. This is their basic drive not just propaganda that they've been fed,” said Mars and then he turned to face Dobby. “Even Dobby here, who loves his freedom, would be miserable if he wasn't helping humans be fed, comfy and happy. Wouldn't you Dobby?”

Dobby shuddered at the thought. “It's what makes us feel fulfilled Miss Hermy.”

“But they still should be paid, taken care of when they're old and it should be illegal to abuse them,” demanded Hermione.

“If I were to trick you with a spell that sent you away from Hogwarts, for your own safety, would you be grateful? Would you understand that I had only your best interests in mind? Would you accept that as justification? Could you study happily in the safety of the New World knowing you had left Harry and the Weasleys to their own destinies?” asked Mars.

Hermione looked confused but managed to shake her head.

“Listen darlin', you know that I agree with your ideals, it's just your methods that are flawed. If you really knew what made house-elves tick, what they love, what they aspire to and what's important to them you would've never tried to trick them into freedom,” lectured Mars.

“But I read all about them. I checked out and read every book that even mentioned elves in the library,” pleaded Hermione.

Mars shook his head. “How many of those books were written by house-elves?”

“Well none, they're not really encouraged to be educated are they?” retorted Hermione.

Mars now smiled in the same sort of superior way that Hermione usually did when she lectured Harry and Ron. “Didn't you tell me back at the Burrow that no one in Wizarding Britain really cared about house-elves?”

“Yes, I did. It was the same night you joined S.P.E.W.”

Mars nodded and continued. “Then why in the world do you think that reading a few books, written by witches or wizards who don't care about them, would let you know how house-elves really felt? Or Miss Granger, were you more interested in how *you thought* they should feel?”

Three times it seemed that Hermione was going to answer his question, but she

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never managed to get any words out. After several seconds of silence she looked up at Mars sadly.

“D-do they really h-hate me?” she asked with her voice shaking.

“I wish I could say no Hermione, but it'd be a lie. You're going to have to work very hard to get into their good graces again. Some of them can be very stubborn,” said Mars as he nodded at Winky.

“Hmph.” replied the elf.

“The first step is to come to an agreement about Gryffindor Tower. Now if Hermione agrees stop leaving out clothes,” Mars glanced at Hermione who nodded at him. “Then Dobby should no longer be required to take care of the Tower himself. Right Soupy?”

“Yes Master Mars. Soupy will make it so,” answered the house-elf.

“Next, I want the elves to let Hermione visit them in the kitchens and for them to chat with her – politely I might add. I imagine instead of trusting books she will want to do her own research from now on.”

Hermione's face lost some of its despair, but Soupy scowled.

“That's no good. House-elves won't wants to speak with *Granger*,” snapped Soupy.

Mars wrinkled his brow. “That was an order Soupy. In return Hermione will promise never to insult any of you again, right?” asked Mars as he look at her. Hermione nodded again, but she looked to be tearing up. “She's muggleborn and saw her first elf only two years ago. Y'all can cut her some slack.”

Dobby and Soupy nodded.

“Mr Mars, sir,” squeaked Winky. “Does Winky has to speaks with Miss *Granger* too? She insults Winky's old master, Mr Crouch.”

Hermione sniffled.

“Yes, Winky, you too. When Hermione was running him down, she didn't know

the whole story. No one but Barty did,” answered Mars kindly. “You three can leave now,” he said waving to the elves.

After they had left and closed the painting behind them Hermione sniffled again. A few tears were rolling down her cheeks, but she was managing to brush them all off. She tried to say something, but choked on the words. Then she sat down and buried her face in her arms on the table, sobbing loudly.

Mars glanced hotly across the room at Harry, Ron and Ginny and then pointed at Hermione. Harry would have sworn he could read Mars' thoughts saying, “Why do you think I wanted you all here anyway?”

Ginny reacted first and scampered across the room to Hermione. She put her arms around her and leaned her head on Hermione's. Hermione quickly returned the embrace and was now sobbing on Ginny's shoulder.

Once Harry and Ron got to the girls, Mars left the room. Neither of the boys seemed to have a clue at what to do to comfort poor Hermione. Harry decided to just be near her and be quiet. It turned out to be a good plan. After five or so minutes, Hermione let go of Ginny and hugged both he and Ron. Then while still sniffing she apologized for being so upset and let Ginny lead her up to bed.

“C'mon lets get a bit of sleep before breakfast.” said Ron shaking his head. “Some week Hermione's having?”

Harry just nodded and followed him up the stairway.

Chapter Eighteen – The Beetle Strikes Back



Over the next few days Harry was amazed at Hermione's resolve. While she was alone with her friends, her misery was apparent; but around others she seemed almost normal. Harry was also impressed that she could keep up with her demanding classes

while feeling so downtrodden. Harry himself barely had time to think. Ron had increased quidditch practice to three times a week, and on Tuesday Harry had a evening make-up lesson with Mars to start learning the Reverse Transfiguration Charm.

Thursday's quidditch practice session was particularly exhausting, and Harry got very little homework done before he trudged off to bed. He immediately fell asleep and started dreaming about the Forbidden Forest. In the dream, he saw centaurs racing amongst the foliage, holding their composite bows tightly. Their speed and grace at dodging the trees exhilarated him. He didn't know what their prey was, but he sensed the anticipation and anxiety of the pursuers.

Soon they reached a clearing and stopped on the edge, so they were obscured by the trees. A centaur he recognized, Magorian, gave hand signals to the rest, who then spread out and readied their bows. They seemed to be pointing at a path that lead into the open area. Harry stared at the entrance uneasily as the centaurs waited. Minutes slowly passed without incident, and then, finally, noises were heard approaching the clearing. A party of twenty or so trolls walked into the open, and behind them were two Death Eaters, wearing their typical robes and foul masks.

Harry gasped loudly, but no one seemed to notice; the trolls and Death Eaters kept walking, and the centaurs didn't so much as flinch. When the trolls and dark wizards had reached the center of the clearing, Magorian loosed an arrow, and the others followed. The volley seemed to be aimed solely at the robed figures, who went down with multiple shafts piercing them.

The trolls looked confused and frightened as the centaurs fired off another round of arrows, dropping many of the monsters. The surviving trolls raised their clubs and charged, screaming, at the centaurs nearest Harry. Those centaurs put away their bows and pulled short spears out of their quivers. They held the spears in front of them like lances and charged at the approaching trolls with their own war cries.

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Harry felt a rush of warmth flow from behind him. It was like sitting in an air-conditioned room on a very hot day when someone opens the door, steps in, and then closes it quickly. He turned to see the cause of this feeling, and Mars was standing before him.

“I had no idea that your divination training had caught on so well, Harry. Precognitive dreams already? Your inner eye must be greater than I believed,” said the tall American, impressed.

“A dream? You mean you're visiting me in a dream again? That battle wasn't real?” asked Harry, befuddled. The trees of the forest vanished before his eyes, replaced by a misty, gray, endless plain.

“Yes, yes, and it might be, one day,” answered Mars.

Harry reviewed the order of his questions before he spoke.

“One day? You're saying I'm seeing the future?”

“A future possibility. Your vision wasn't a prophecy; it isn't definite. The clearer you see it, the more likely it is, though,” answered Mars.

“It looked pretty clear to me.”

“To me also. Like I said, I'm surprised at how much you've managed with only subliminal training. It's such a shame that I've been prevented from instructing you until recently. Sybil tries her best, but she's just —”

“A fraud?” suggested Harry.

“Now, Harry, that's a bit harsh. She does have talent. Don't let that dramatic act fool you. If she'd just quit with the embellishments, the students might learn from her, but there's this huge chip on her shoulder. Her great-great-grandmother was a tremendous Seer, and it pains Sybil that she's just not in that league. Believe me when I say that it is very difficult to live up to expectations when an ancestor of yours is a legend,” replied Mars.

“What d'you mean by subliminal?” asked Harry.

“I mean I've been training you as a Seer since your first Occlumency lesson this summer.”

“But—but, why not tell me?”

“It's quite normal not to notify a young Seer when you first start teaching them. Since it's such a rare and useful talent, the students can often get rather full of themselves. There are basic training steps that need to be learned before you can harness all of your talent, but these steps are mundane compared to seeing the future, so they slack off in learning these building block skills. This often leads the young seers to develop bad habits, and then they never reach their full potential.

“Once the students know how special they are, they tend to think they know better than the instructor. Well, at least most of us were that way,” said Mars with a guilty grin.

Harry smiled up at Mars.

“You'll wake any second. Get Ron and meet me in the common room,” said Mars before he faded from view.

Harry and Ron worked with Mars again on the Cruciatus Curse; again, Mars had to help both of the boys with his empathy in order to get their minds in the proper state. After several hours of practice, the boys used the fireplace to return to Gryffindor Tower.

“We've still an hour before they serve breakfast.” said Harry, looking at his new watch. “Is it worth trying to get in a quick nap?”

Before Ron could answer, Hermione's voice rang out behind them.

“You should probably start your Care of Magical Creatures homework. Neither of you paid much attention during the last class.”

Harry and Ron spun quickly to see Hermione standing next to the Galaxy Globe behind them. If their sudden exit from the fireplace bothered her, it didn't show. She wasn't even looking at them, but was quickly changing the view that the orb presented.

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“Hermione, what are you doing up at this hour?” asked Ron.

“Same as you, Ron. Studying Defense Against the Dark Arts,” she replied, still looking at the globe.

Harry and Ron goggled at each other for a few seconds and then looked again at Hermione.

“So you've had extra lessons from Mars too?” asked Harry.

“Yes, of course. Mars' UAS is just incredible, but it's very complex. Padma and I need the extra sessions,” answered Hermione.

“Ginny also knew about the fireplace, she must be in on it too,” Ron pointed out.

“Certainly. Do you really think Mars would leave a Weasley out?” asked Hermione with a smile. “There are others as well. Haven't you two ever noticed that practically every day two or three different students look like they've been up all night?”

“Now that you mention it, yeah,” said Harry.

“Well, it's caused by the same thing that will make you look that way today,” said Hermione as she turned back to the globe. “Now, I suggest that you two go get your books and finish Hagrid's reading before we head down for breakfast.”

After the draining session they had just experienced, neither Harry nor Ron felt like studying at all. However, the shock of discovering they weren't alone in their late night studies rendered them unable to argue with Hermione, so they both fetched their books and read until breakfast.

Harry, Ron and Hermione were, unsurprisingly, the first Gryffindors to arrive in the Great Hall. Once they had filled their plates, Ginny joined them. The four of them discussed their plans for tomorrow, their first Hogsmeade weekend of the year. Hogsmeade was a wizarding village located near Hogwarts, and was the largest all-wizard community in Britain. Harry had been banned from it by Professor Umbridge last year, so he was really looking forward to visiting his favorite spots in the town after such a long

absence. Harry especially wanted to get a good look at the Shrieking Shack. Every time he'd been there it seemed that something had distracted him.

Ron had just started talking about what he would buy at Honeydukes when Harry again had the feeling of being watched. This feeling was much stronger than when Mars had cast the spell, so Harry was sure it was a student spying on him. Harry feigned interest in what Ron was saying, trying to look natural as he glanced about the room. There weren't many people in the Great Hall, but none of them looked suspicious.

“Harry,” Hermione sounding annoyed. “Are you even listening to me?”

“Huh? Of course I am. Er – what did you say again?”

Hermione glared at him and answered, “I asked if you want me to pick up some quills or ink for you. I'm going to Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop while I'm in Hogsmeade tomorrow. Do you need anything?”

“No, no, I'm fine. Just fine,” said Harry. Just as he turned his head back to the entrance, he saw a tall figure dash quickly out of the doorway. He jumped up and sprinted out of the Great Hall.

“Harry, what are you doing?” Ron and Hermione called after him.

He ignored them and looked down the corridors that connected to the Entrance Hall. Many students were passing him on their way in to breakfast; he could just make out one student with bushy red hair picking her way through the crowd, going in the opposite direction .

“Ester,” he said to himself, turning back to the Great Hall.

When Harry returned, he saw Ginny and Hermione, along with Parvati, Katie and Lavender, all whispering amongst each other and giggling quietly. The girls all seemed entranced by the arriving mail owls, and when a small screech owl delivered a note to Ginny they gathered around her excitedly. This fuss over the post captured even Ron's attention away from his food. “What's all this, then?” asked Ron, craning his neck in an

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attempt to read Ginny's letter.

Ginny quickly moved the paper away from Ron's view and the girls placed themselves around her protectively.

"It's just girl talk, Ron; nothing that would interest you," answered Ginny, with a mischievous grin.

Harry, however, caught a glimpse of the message that Ginny held:

... never have managed this without your and Hermione's help. Thanks so much again. Wish me luck on Saturday.

Love from Tonks

PS I hope he isn't furious with the lot of us. Though his blue eyes are so cute when he's angry!

Harry was peering toward the top of the letter when Hermione spotted him. She snatched the paper from Ginny and folded it so that the writing was hidden. "Honestly," said Hermione, annoyed. "Since when have you two ever cared to get in touch with your feminine sides?"

The girls got up from the table, chatting as they left the Great Hall.

"Just what are they up to?" wondered Ron as he and Harry followed behind them.

"I don't know, but that letter was from Tonks," answered Harry.

"You managed to read it?"

"Just the end. Didn't make much sense though. She thanked them for their help on something and then asked them to wish her luck on Saturday. In the PS she mentioned a guy with blue eyes being cute when he's angry, I think anyways. It was just a quick look," Harry shrugged.

Ron made a face. "Ginny was right, I didn't want to hear that rubbish."

Fridays were Harry's favorite school day and had today not been one, Harry wasn't sure if he would have managed. Thoroughly exhausted, he and Ron were thankful that Professor Flitwick in Double Charms had them casting the Bubble Head Charm on each

other. They were so amused by the look of Hermione's bushy hair squashed up inside the bubble that they laughed themselves into their second wind. Harry expected Hermione to be cross with them, but she took the teasing in stride and even managed a smile.

The rest of the day flew by for Harry. Even quidditch practice was short. Ron announced that everyone had executed their assignments so well that he was dismissing the team after an only hour. Harry privately thought that Ron only having had two hours of the sleep the night before had a lot to do with his decision; however, he kept this suspicion to himself. A short session suited him fine: Tomorrow, Saturday, was the first Hogsmeade weekend of the year, and Harry wanted to be well rested.

Harry, Ron and Ginny warmed up in front of the fire in the Gryffindor Common Room. Quidditch practice may have been short, but it was still cold for flying around on a broomstick. Just as Harry was finally feeling nice and toasty, Hermione came through the painting and headed towards them. Ginny spotted her and jumped energetically out of her seat.

“Is he going tomorrow?” she asked Hermione.

“Yes!” Hermione smiled. “He's visiting some friends that live near the Post Office.”

Ginny shrieked in delight and grabbed Hermione's hand. She dragged her quickly to Parvati and Lavender's table and then called Katie and Mary over to join them. Harry and Ron stared dully at the chatting girls, who were clearly having the time of their lives.

“Think it might be safer if we gave it a miss tomorrow?” suggested Ron.

“Probably,” replied Harry. “Whatever they're planning must be big if it's cheered Hermione up this much. I still want to go though. It's been a long time since I've been to Honeydukes.”

Hearing the name of his favorite sweets shop brought a smile to Ron's face. “You're right,” he said happily. “We'll just be careful to stay out of the girls' way.”

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Saturday morning after breakfast the four friends headed out the Hogwarts gate and down the road to Hogsmeade in excellent spirits. Ron was humming the Fizzing Whizzbies jingle, Hermione and Ginny were still giddy from the night before, and Harry was looking forward to a pleasant and peaceful trip.

Shortly thereafter, they were happily strolling down the first of the Hogsmeade streets when Ginny stopped short. “There's Mars now,” she said in surprise, pointing. “But that's not the way to the Post Office, is it?”

“No, it's not. He'll miss her completely that way!” answered Hermione nervously. “Change of plan, I'm afraid. Ginny, you go straight to her and lead her 'round the Shrieking Shack. I'll catch him up and make sure we rendezvous there. Harry, Ron. If we don't see you around town, then we'll all meet at The Three Broomsticks at 4:30, okay?”

Harry and Ron nodded, and both girls sped off.

“Well at least we know who the guy with blue eyes is now,” said Harry.

“Never knew Tonks fancied him, though,” pondered Ron.

“Think we should warn him? Just so he isn't too surprised at what they're up to?” asked Harry.

“Too late for that, mate; besides, Mars can take care of himself. To Honeydukes!” exclaimed Ron. He headed eagerly down the street and Harry followed.

Harry and Ron had an excellent time wandering about the village. After stuffing themselves at Honeydukes, they took in the sights, and even stopped by Zonko's Joke Shop. They would never buy anything from a shop that competed with George and Fred, but they figured a little spying on the enemy could be fun, if not helpful.

After they had wandered around for an hour, with no sign of Hermione or Ginny, the boys headed to The Three Broomsticks. It was only 3:45, so they sat down at a table and ordered two butterbeers. Parvati, Padma and Lavender were at a table nearby. A quarter of an hour later, Ginny entered the pub, with Luna in tow rather than Hermione.

Ginny smiled at Harry and her brother as she took a seat at their table. Luna stopped at the table and stared at Ron.

“Aren't you staying for a butterbeer, Luna?” asked Ginny.

“No,” said Luna softly. “I want to get back and have a look at these items Mars recommended.” She gently shook her shopping bag. Her gaze had not left Ron. “Goodbye Ginny, Harry, goodbye Ronald.” Luna wandered away.

Ron shook his head and looked at Ginny. “I know she's your friend, but she still creeps me out.” Ginny and Harry exchanged smiles.

“So how did your little match-making scheme turn out?” asked Ron.

“Aside from the inauspicious start, quite well, actually. Hermione tried to play off running into Mars as an accident, but you know how hard it is to lie to him,” answered Ginny. The boys nodded at her. “However, he seemed to think it was funny that we were setting him up with Tonks. All four of us ended up having lunch with his friends, the Herberts. Afterward, Mars and Tonks disappeared over to Diagon Alley to meet Bill and Fleur. Not sure what they're up to, though.”

“Where's Hermione, then?” asked Harry.

“We ran into Luna when we left the Herberts, and Luna wanted help with some shopping, so I left with her. Hermione said she was going to the quill shop and then come straight here. She should have arrived before me,” finished Ginny, looking a little concerned.

“Well, she probably decided to look for some new books or something,” suggested Harry. The Weasleys agreed and they chatted merrily over another round of butter beer.

As the afternoon gave way to evening, the teenagers' mood, like the sky, darkened. At a quarter to six, they were the only students left in the Three Broomsticks, and most likely Hogsmeade; and there had still been no sign of Hermione. Ten minutes later, Harry, Ginny and Ron left the pub and looked around the emptying streets in vain, in case for

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some unknown reason Hermione had chosen to remain outside.

Harry sighed worriedly. “I can't see her going back to school without telling us. Something must have happened to her.”

“But what?” asked Ginny.

“I don't know, but we can't just sit around and wait for her to show up any longer. Ginny, you get back to Hogwarts as fast as you can and tell Dumbledore or McGonagall Hermione's missing. Ron and I will look around the village,” said Harry.

“I want to stay and look for her too!” argued Ginny.

“There's no time to discuss it, Ginny. They'll want answers about what she was doing and planning today. You were in on it; we weren't. We need you to do this. Please,” said Harry desperately.

Ginny paused and gave Harry a determined nod; she turned and started jogging in the direction of Hogwarts. Harry reached down and felt for the his wand in his waist band. He knew what he had to do, but he worried about being tricked. In his fifth year, Hermione had warned Harry that Voldemort knew Harry was the heroic type. That was why, in their second year, Voldemort had kidnapped Ginny—to lure Harry into the Chamber of Secrets. Three years later, the Dark Lord had made Harry think that his godfather, Sirius Black, was being held prisoner and tortured. Voldemort knew Harry would try to save someone he loved. Harry did not want to fall for this again, but he couldn't think of any other acceptable course of action. He turned to Ron.

“We need to stick together. It could be a trap: remember the Department of Mysteries last year,” said Harry darkly.

Ron swallowed hard and nodded; the two boys started scanning the buildings and alleyways for anything suspicious.

They headed slowly towards the quill shop. Harry doubted there would be any clues there, but he didn't know what else to do. They arrived at the closed store and

looked around for a few fruitless minutes. Just then, Harry heard the same cacophonous music that he had on the night he first met Mars. He instinctively looked up. “Lily's here somewhere,” he said. He could already feel his mood changing from fearful and despairing to confident and vengeful.

“That's her singing?” asked Ron, confused. He had only been privy to her cheerful songs.

A large bat flew up and circled the boys once. The music was much louder, and Harry longed to get his hands on the villain who had abducted his friend. After circling them, the bat started down an alley with the boys tailing Lily as quickly as they could. They followed her, mostly by ear, through streets and back alleys, and around strange buildings.

Just when Harry thought he could sprint no further, Lily began circling a foul-looking two-story building on the edge of the town proper. Ron and he slowly approached the structure, which had a small faded sign over the front door labeling it, “Frosomer's Room and Board.” It looked abandoned, except that from one of its second-story windows, a flickering light glowed through a tattered curtain.

“So what do you think?” asked Ron as they stood in front of the rotting sign, catching their breath.

“It looks like Lily believes Hermione's up there, and I don't think we can wait for help, Ron. We have to go ourselves.”

Ron nodded; the boys drew their wands and started up the steps. The front door was locked, but it was in such sad state that Harry knew it would be easy to force their way in. The Alohomora charm, however, was quieter, so they used it to gain entry. They stepped inside with the sound of Lily's song ringing in their ears.

It was so dark that Harry couldn't see anything until Ron said “Lumos” and lit the tip of his wand; Harry did the same. A thick coating of dust covered the floor and the

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surfaces of the old furniture that sat decaying throughout the large parlor. The air was stagnant and smelled of mold and wood rot. Harry moved his wand around, lighting up different parts of the room, as he looked for a staircase or a door to one.

“Harry, look: footprints in the dust!” hissed Ron, pointing his wand at the floor in front of them.

A single set of prints led deeper into the room. The feet that had made them didn't appear to be very big, but they were still too large to be Hermione's. Harry and Ron followed them through a doorway on the left side of room and into a hall. The prints led down the hall and climbed a staircase. The boys stood at the bottom of the staircase, pointing their wand lights up it, when a voice made them jump.

“No, please, not again—please, no.”

“Hermione!” they whispered. Harry and Ron scampered up the steps as quickly as they could, although the need for stealth and the rickety state of the stairs slowed their ascent. From the top of the staircase, they saw, down another hall, a door with light flooding under it. As surreptitiously as they could manage, the boys crept up to the door.

“Crucio!” They heard a harsh woman's voice from inside the room and suddenly Hermione was screaming in agony. Abandoning stealth, Harry thrust his wand at the door, crying, “Alohomora!” The door burst open and Ron flung himself through it, with Harry right behind him.

They saw Hermione, tied into a desk chair by a thin cord that coiled around her. Her face was bruised, scratched, and bleeding in many places. A few feet to her right, Rita Skeeter stood, wearing a dark brown cloak, with a crazed look on her face.

Ron pointed his wand at Rita's heart. “Stupefy!” he cried, and a red beam flew at Rita, but she blocked his spell. Before Harry or Ron could get off another jinx, Rita spun her wand in a tight circle and said, “Avada Kedavra!”

Hermione shrieked as a sickly green light flashed at Ron. Harry heard the sound of

invisible death rushing at his best friend. Ron dove onto the floor; the wall above his back exploded. Harry didn't know if Rita missed due to surprise or because Ron had mastered dodging from his Defense training, but at the moment he didn't care. What mattered was that she had left herself exposed to his jinx; Harry hit her dead on with a stunning spell. Skeeter flew back several feet and hit her head on a bureau that was missing its feet; she fell to the floor, spread-eagled and stunned.

“Diffindo! Diffindo!”

Harry turned his gaze to Hermione. Ron was cutting her bonds with the tearing charm. Harry hurried over and helped him with the last few coils. Once released from the coils, poor Hermione was too weak to sit up on her own and the boys had to hold her up. With what strength she could muster, Hermione turned to stare straight into Ron's eyes.

“The killing curse ...” she said weakly. “I thought – I feared – I – I,” she fell silent, and her head rolled into Ron's hands.

Harry quickly checked her neck for a pulse. “Her heart's still beating, Ron. I think she's just passed out,” he reassured Ron quickly. Ron acknowledged this with a worried nod. “I hope she's okay to move. We have to get her to the hospital right away,” he added.

The boys lifted Hermione gently; then they heard hurried steps approaching. They quickly set her back down and readied their wands.

A tall wizard in auror robes entered the room, and swore in surprise when he saw Rita Skeeter laid out on the floor. When his eyes passed over the three teenagers, he did a series of double takes. He quickly recovered and asked, gazing worriedly at Hermione, “Is she alive?”

“Yes, but we need to get her to a healer fast,” answered Ron earnestly.

“What are the three of you doing hanging around that low-life?” the auror asked, pointing at Rita.

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“We weren't hanging around with that cow! She kidnapped Hermione,” said Ron hotly.

“We heard her using the Cruatious Curse on our friend,” added Harry.

“An unforgivable curse? Why would a sleazy reporter invite a life sentence in Azkaban to hurt this girl?” asked the auror.

Harry bit his lip. He knew exactly why Rita Skeeter wanted to hurt Hermione, but he didn't dare explain it. In their fourth year, Hermione had discovered Rita was an unregistered animagus—a condition that would land her a few years in Azkaban if the authorities found out. For her silence on the matter, Hermione only required that Skeeter not write any more slanted stories about Harry or his friends. In their fifth year, however, Hermione threatened to expose Rita's secret to the Department of Law Enforcement if she didn't write a story that Hermione wanted in print. At the time the idea seemed brilliant, but Harry realized that what Hermione had done was illegal, and he had no idea how stiff the punishment for extortion was in the wizarding world.

“They had an argument two years back. Hermione insulted her in a crowded pub; I guess Rita wanted to get even,” said Ron unconvincingly.

“That doesn't sound likely,” said a voice from the doorway. Harry looked over and saw another auror enter the room. Harry had seen this one before: it was the auror Bill had identified at the Premiership as a follower of Jo Ann Lennon.

“I agree, Simpson,” said the first auror. “But where have you been? You were right behind me when we started to approach this building, once the boys had entered it.”

“I circled around a bit to see if anyone else was near.”

The first auror didn't look impressed with this answer; he had opened his mouth to speak when Harry interrupted him. “How did you know we were entering this place? Were you following us?”

“No, we've been watching *her*,” said Simpson, pointing to the stunned reporter.

“Though she gave us the slip for a few hours this afternoon. She's the one we need to ask to find out why she kidnapped this girl.” He headed toward Rita with his wand in hand.

Harry and Ron glanced at each other nervously. By using the Cruciatus Curse on a human, Rita had doomed herself to a life sentence in Azkaban. It was doubtful she would care now if the aurors discovered that she was also an animagus. Harry thought it likely that she would now be more than willing to tell the aurors about Hermione's extortion.

Simpson bound Rita in a thin coil and looked ready to revive her when a flash of fire appeared in the room. Everyone turned to look as Dumbledore and Fawkes stepped out of the cloud of smoke that had formed. The phoenix immediately flew over to Hermione, landed on her lap, and started dropping tears on her face.

“Harry, Ron,” said Dumbledore sharply. “What happened to Miss Granger?”

Harry quickly filled Dumbledore in on the events that occurred after Ginny had left to fetch help. The headmaster inhaled loudly as he glanced at his pupils and took in the situation. Harry looked nervously up at him, while Ron held Hermione upright. She was still unconscious, but looked markedly better from the healing power of Fawkes's tears.

Dumbledore turned to face Rita and the aurors; Harry and Ron noticed a small downy woodpecker perched on the back of his collar, hiding under his long gray hair.

“Hello, Simpson, Hollings. I suppose you want to question Miss Skeeter,” Dumbledore said.

“Yes, Dumbledore,” said Simpson sharply. “I am very keen to know why she would want to cause one of your students so much pain and cause herself so much trouble.”

He then pointed his wand at the reporter and said, “Enervate!”

Rita shook her head woozily; her glasses were askew. She stared at the aurors and Dumbledore, then started screaming. “No!!! You must not stop me. The mudblood has to suffer!” She writhed violently on the floor, screeching like a banshee.

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“Silencio!” cried Hollings, stepping toward her. She was struck dumb immediately.

“Mudblood? That's an odd thing to hear from old Rita,” mused Simpson.

“Why?” asked Harry.

“Because her father is muggleborn, and he's about the only person this sorry wench has ever really liked,” answered Simpson.

Hollings nodded in agreement and added, “We learned a lot about her over the last year or so. Fudge was paranoid that the media was out to get him even after he issued his gag order. Once Skeeter's interview with Harry Potter here was published in the Quibbler, he wanted dirt on her so we could lock her up.”

Simpson bent over the squirming Skeeter and held her still. He looked closely at her face and eyes.

“See the dark circles under her eyes? Signs of stress everywhere on her face? She might be under someone's control,” suggested Simpson.

“She could be. Only one way to find out,” said Hollings.

Dumbledore nodded and Simpson started digging in his robes for something.

“Professor?” said Ron nervously. “I don't mean to interrupt, but Hermione needs a healer, don't you think?”

“A carriage is on the way, Mr. Weasley. With Fawkes' help she should be alright until then,” answered Dumbledore kindly. He looked at Simpson.

Simpson dumped a few sprinkles of blue powder into his hand and tapped his palm with a steel rod. Blue smoke arose from his palm and he, Hollings, and Dumbledore all peered through it into Rita's eyes. After a few seconds Simpson broke the silence. “Well I guess that removes all doubt. Hollings, you want to free her?”

The other auror nodded, rolled up his sleeves, and waved his wand around Skeeter's head. “Libertasio!” Her face contorted, much as Cho's had when Dumbledore freed her. After a moment, a green mist floated away from her head and dispersed into the air. Rita

stopped moving; she appeared to have passed out.

The sound of an approaching carriage carried through the window. As it stopped, a familiar voice rang out loudly. “Professor Dumbledore, are yeh up there?” yelled Hagrid.

“Yes, Hagrid! I don't think this rotting second story could support someone of your size; it'd be best to send them down to you,” answered Dumbledore.

“Alright then,” answered the giant.

Harry and Ron immediately lifted Hermione off the chair, slinging one of her arms over each of them.

“Mr. Weasley, if you would like to accompany Miss Granger to the hospital, please feel free. Tell Poppy I insist. But I want you to stay with me, Mr. Potter. Please come back to this room once you're finished helping,” said Dumbledore. His tone suggested that this was not merely a request.

The boys acknowledged their Headmaster and carefully carried Hermione to the thestral carriage below. Hagrid looked panicky when he saw Hermione, and only agreed to leave when Ron promised to tell him the story on the ride back to Hogwarts. Harry returned to the creepy bedroom upstairs.

When Harry walked back into the room, Rita Skeeter was sitting in the chair that had been used to restrain Hermione, looking very woozy. Dumbledore and the two aurors appeared to be in the midst of a polite disagreement.

“I think it is too dangerous to try to unseal the memory charm on her so soon after being liberated. Her sanity could be damaged,” stated Dumbledore.

“We have to risk it, Dumbledore. Any delay will hurt our chances of catching the caster of the Imperious Curse,” argued Simpson.

“I know it's risky, Professor,” Hollings agreed, “but the witch or wizard that cast the spell now knows that it has been removed. They can't be sure that an auror did it, but they'll probably assume the worst. If they're not already hiding, we might have a chance

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to catch them.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Very well, but then I insist on being the Legilimens myself.”

Neither auror seemed to like the idea very much, but they agreed to Dumbledore's request. The headmaster walked over to the reporter and put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Now, Rita, do not fight my spell. It will only make it worse. We have to find out who cursed you,” said Dumbledore.

She nodded weakly.

Dumbledore conjured one of his typical armchairs next to Rita. He then sat down and stared into her eyes, in much the same way Mars had done with Harry during their Occlumency lessons. Rita trembled as Dumbledore's spell continued for several tense minutes.

“Yes, I have found the charm,” he said softly at last. The headmaster mumbled a few unintelligible words and then broke eye contact with Rita, leaning suddenly back into his chair.

Rita looked like she now felt much better. She still seemed dazed, but appeared to be coming out of it. Harry thought Dumbledore had perhaps insisted on probing her mind himself in order to relieve some of her suffering.

The two aurors approached Rita Skeeter eagerly. “Miss Skeeter,” said Hollings sternly. “Can you tell us who was controlling you with the Imperious Curse?”

Rita shook her head a bit and finally came out of her trance. She looked at Dumbledore, who smiled at her, but instead of returning his smile she screamed and scooted her chair back frantically. “You! Get away from me!” She stood up and tried to flee, but Simpson grabbed her and pushed her back into the chair.

“Calm down, witch! What's the matter with you?” asked Simpson forcefully; but Harry noticed a hint of smile on his face. Perhaps he enjoyed seeing Rita so scared?

“It's him,” she shrieked, pointing an accusing finger at Dumbledore. “The wizard that cursed me works for him at Hogwarts!”

“What?” said Dumbledore and Harry together.

“Which wizard at Hogwarts?” asked Simpson.

She swallowed and tried to calm herself enough to speak without trembling. Then she said plainly, “A professor there cursed me and ordered me to torture Hermione Granger. He said she was an annoying know-it-all and a mudblood to boot.” She spat as she said mudblood.

“Which professor, you stupid woman?” demanded Simpson angrily.

“Severus Snape.”

Chapter Nineteen – Seeds of Conflict



Shock reverberated throughout the room. No one could believe what Rita Skeeter had just said.

“Professor, you were watching her eyes. Was she telling the truth?” demanded Hollings.

“Yes, Gerald. She was not lying,” answered Dumbledore.

“Snape always did hate muggleborns in school,” said Simpson. “Well, I think this is more than enough to get an arrest order. Skeeter, we’ll be in touch with you. See you at the Ministry, Hollings.” He disappeared with a *crack*.

Harry was reeling too much to speak. As much as he hated Snape, and as much as he knew Snape hated him and his friends, Harry could not imagine Snape using Unforgivable Curses to hurt them.

“Professor Dumbledore, I know Severus Snape has worked for you for a very long time. But we’re going to have to arrest him. I can’t ignore this evidence,” said Hollings.

“I understand, Gerald. Just make sure that he ends up with the Ministry, and not CADS, will you?”

“Too right about that. I’ve had it to here with those nuts. I’ll see you at Hogwarts, then,” Hollings nodded and disappeared.

Rita looked at them fearfully. She mumbled something that might have been “thank you” and disappeared.

Lily came out from under Dumbledore’s hair and flew quickly through the window. The headmaster gazed down at Harry with concern. “Harry, I need you to stay with me for the rest of the evening. I’m afraid it’s going to be a long and difficult night.”

Harry nodded.

Dumbledore put out his hand and bid Harry to take it. As Harry did so, Fawkes flew over to them, and the Professor grabbed Fawkes’ tail-feathers. A feeling of great lightness spread over Harry’s entire body, and he felt himself rise off the floor. Harry then felt a rush of warmth. He looked around, and instead of the drab bedroom that had been there only a second before, Harry saw endless sky filled with brilliant—almost blinding—light in every direction. He could see no clouds, no buildings – not even the ground. It was painful to keep his eyes open, but the radiant beauty around him compelled him.

The next moment everything went dark and Harry again felt the tug of gravity. As

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his eyes adjusted, Harry recognized Dumbledore's office, and saw that Professor McGonagall was there. She approached the Headmaster.

“Oh Albus, is it true what Professor Mars is saying?” McGonagall asked nervously. “That Rita Skeeter tortured Hermione Granger with the Cruciatus Curse and claimed Severus had forced her to with the Imperious Curse?”

“Yes, Minerva. I witnessed her release from the curse, and myself removed the Memory Charm that had been placed upon her. She was not lying when she accused Severus of the crime. It is very hard to accept,” he brooded. “Where is Mars? I need to speak with him immediately.”

“He told me to meet you here and that he was going to move Severus to a protected area,” she answered.

“Ah, yes, good thinking. We must ensure it is the Ministry that arrests Professor Snape, and not the Committee Against Dark Sorcerers. We should wait in the Entrance Hall to greet the aurors when they arrive. I do not wish for any of them to gain entrance to the castle without speaking to me first,” said Dumbledore, and he headed for the exit.

On the way to the Entrance Hall, McGonagall questioned Dumbledore and Harry thoroughly about the events in Hogsmeade. As they reached the Hall, she looked up at Dumbledore and said quietly, “Do you really think Severus did this?”

“As unimaginable as it seems, I am positive that Rita Skeeter was telling the truth, Minerva. However, I will speak with Mars before I decide upon Severus's guilt.”

Professor McGonagall turned away from him and stared gloomily at the front doors. A moment later, a hallway door opened and Mars stepped through. He looked very cross as he approached the three of them.

“Severus is a fool, Headmaster! He refused to take refuge in my office, even temporarily,” spat Mars in disgust.

“That is most unfortunate. It is probably the safest place in the castle. Where is he

then?" asked Dumbledore.

"His own office. And of course, he refused to let me place any wards upon its door."

"That is the first place they will look for him; very foolish. We must make sure no one enters the Castle without my approval."

"Yeah, I know. At least he allowed Flitwick to stay with him," said Mars.

"That's something. Did you get a chance to test his veracity?"

"It wasn't easy, but yes, I made him declare his innocence while under my gaze. He's telling the truth; he did not curse that boneheaded reporter," answered Mars.

Dumbledore visibly relaxed.

"But – but Mars," McGonagall protested. "Professor Dumbledore is positive that the Skeeter woman was telling the truth about Severus."

"I know."

"But one of them *has* to be lying," she replied.

"No Minerva, one of them just has to be wrong," declared Mars.

Harry was trying to work out Mars' meaning when the front doors opened. Jo Anne Lennon, impeccably dressed in aqua robes, entered the hall in the company of another witch and two wizards; all four headed straight for Dumbledore. The witch and one of the wizards wore auror robes.

When the group was a short distance away, Lennon spoke. "I'm sure you know why we're here. I do wish it could be for a happier reason." Her teeth twinkled in the torchlight.

"Yes, I understand, Jo Anne. Do you know when the Ministry officials will arrive to detain Severus for questioning?" asked Dumbledore.

Lennon's smile faded.

"The Committee Against Dark Sorcerers will be handling the interrogation,

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Professor Dumbledore. I've already advised the Ministry not to send its people to Hogwarts.”

“Then I'm afraid we have a problem, because I am not going to let you take him,” said Dumbledore politely.

Harry expected Lennon to fly into a rage. Her voice, however, remained calm. “Come now, let's be reasonable. We have indisputable facts showing that Severus Snape has cast an Unforgivable Curse to control a witch, and then forced his thrall to use another Unforgivable Curse to torture one of your own students. You yourself helped gather the evidence.”

“I do not deny that the facts are stacked against Professor Snape, but I will only allow his arrest by the Ministry itself.”

For several minutes Dumbledore and Lennon argued, tensely, but politely. Harry waited for the CADS people to try something, but they simply stood around and let their leader negotiate. Finally, Mars ended his silence.

“It's a ruse, Professor. They're just a decoy,” said Mars, pointing at Lennon. “Another party of CADS members have already reached Snape's office. They just used a portkey to escape the castle.”

Dumbledore's face soured a bit, but he kept his sharp blue eyes on Lennon. “They couldn't have gotten in with a portkey.”

“I agree. It seems they used the secret passage that leads to the Serpent's Labyrinth to get in. Making a portkey to get *out* of Hogwarts is a lot simpler,” said Mars, with a distant look on his face.

Harry didn't remembering any secret passage in the labyrinth near the Slytherin Common Room on his Marauder's Map. He had always thought that the map—created by his father and his father's three best friends during their own school years—had charted every part of Hogwarts.

“That door cannot be opened from the outside. They must have had help,” said Dumbledore.

Mars nodded, still looking distant. “Flitwick is hurt. Lily left to bring Poppy to him,” said Mars, and snapped his gaze back to Jo Anne Lennon. “They can't be allowed to keep Severus. Not for a single day. We cannot wait for the Ministry to straighten this out,” said Mars to Dumbledore.

“Now, wait a moment, Mars. He's our prisoner. It's not up to you –” Lennon began when Mars cut her off.

“Silence!” he cried. His wand seemed to leap into his hand, and he pointed it at the CADS members. They reached for their own wands, but Mars barked, “Displacio!” The familiar red spheres shot out of his wand and surrounded the four committee members, tumbling their victims round and round in mid-air like clothes in a dryer. Smaller arcs of the spheres pried the wands from the members' hands; after only a few seconds, each of the enemy wands was in Mars' possession.

Mars let the members tumble for a few more seconds before releasing his spell; they thudded to the floor. All had passed out, either from the tumbling or the landing on the stone floor. Mars faced Dumbledore. “I'll have to go to their headquarters and bust Snape out. Our informants have given us very good intelligence on the building, so I think I know right where they're keeping him,” he said quickly.

“Yes, get him as soon as possible. I will speak with the Minister while you're gone. If he's just going to let CADS do as they please, there is little point in us propping up his regime any longer,” said Dumbledore.

“You know, Professor...I could do more than just free Severus while I'm there.”

“What's on your mind, Mars?”

“We have their leader in our grasp, and Simpson too. Lennon trusts Simpson more than anyone in the world. Why not finish them all off once I secure Snape? Any hope of

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Lennon breaking free of Dolohov's influence is long gone. Surely you can see that? His man Spikes leads her around by the nose. CADS is becoming more and more hindering. We should rid ourselves of them before they become strong enough to challenge the Ministry militarily!”

“No, Mars, I cannot condone that. There are still good witches and wizards in CADS, and I do not think Lennon is a lost cause. An all-out war with the Committee would not be in our interests.”

“Very well,” said Mars, annoyed. “I’ll heed your advice, but I fear this inaction will haunt us in the future.” He handed Dumbledore the four wands he had taken, and walked out the front doors.

“I’ll deal with these,” Dumbledore told McGonagall, glancing at the four unconscious people in front of them. “Would you be so kind as to take Mr. Potter to the Hospital wing? I imagine he would like to see how Miss Granger is doing.”

“Professor, that Displacement Charm that Mars cast. It was – was, well ...,” stammered McGonagall, searching for the right word.

“Impressive?” suggested Dumbledore.

“Impossible!—or so I would have said had I not seen it with my own eyes. A display of power like that scares me. Was he trying to send a message?”

“Yes, Minerva. To our enemies, not us. No one despises Voldemort more than Mars. You have nothing to fear from him,” answered Dumbledore reassuringly.

McGonagall acknowledged the Headmaster with a nod, but she did not look mollified. She and Harry headed for the Hospital Wing.

As they neared the Hospital, Harry turned to McGonagall. “What bothered you so much about the Displacement Charm?” he asked.

“It’s not the charm that worried me, Potter, just its application. That charm is for moving enormous objects, like a bus or a house. A powerful wizard like Mars or

Dumbledore might even be able to move something as big as this castle. The caster normally has little or no control of the target once it begins moving,” she said.

“So maybe Mars has just practiced it a lot?”

“Potter, don't be thick!” she barked. “What he did with that spell would be the equivalent of conjuring a hurricane and then using it to blow the candles out on a birthday cake without damaging anything else nearby. That doesn't happen because of practice and it isn't just impressive. I tell you, that kind of power is unthinkable!” blurted McGonagall. She paused, straightened her robes, and regained her demeanor. “Come. Let's check on Miss Granger, shall we?”

Hermione was going to be okay, Madam Pomfrey assured them. She had not been tortured long enough to cause permanent damage. Madam Pomfrey let Harry and Ron stay the night in the ward, though the treatment Hermione had received left her unconscious for the whole night. Harry told an astonished Ron about Skeeter accusing Snape of controlling her with the Imperious Curse.

At breakfast Sunday morning, Ginny leaped on Harry and Ron with questions. The boys related their struggle in the abandoned boarding house and Skeeter's subsequent accusation, to Ginny's consternation and astonishment.

“So Mars and Dumbledore are convinced Snape didn't do it?” asked Ginny.

“Yeah, but I still don't understand how both he and Rita Skeeter can be telling the truth,” said Harry.

They gulped down their breakfast and hurried to Hospital to see Hermione. This time Hermione was awake and very pleased to see them. She insisted on hugs from all three of them as she lay in bed. It appeared that Hermione didn't remember much about her abduction. She recalled walking down the alley that ran by the quill shop, and then waking up in the dusty bedroom with Rita Skeeter leering at her. Hermione did not elaborate on her bruises and scratches.

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The four of them were not allowed to visit for long as Madam Pomfrey insisted that Hermione needed rest. As the three friends were about to leave, Hermione asked Ron for another hug; he looked confused but quickly complied. As he let go, Hermione said, “Thank you for saving me,” kissed him quickly right on the lips, and laid back down with a smile on her face. Harry was taken aback, but Ginny grinned broadly.

Ron left the Hospital in such a happy daze that Harry and Ginny had to practically hand steer him back to the Gryffindor Common Room. They tried to spend the rest of the day on homework, but their thoughts were so distracted by Saturday's events that they accomplished very little. Harry was intensely relieved that Hermione was okay, but he wondered what was happening with Mars and Snape.

Much to their delight, Hermione joined them for breakfast Monday morning. When the delivery owl brought the Daily Prophet, she read the headlines out to the others. “CADS Chairwoman Jo Anne Lennon calls for the arrest of Mars,” she said with concern.

“How'd you like to be the auror with that assignment?” Harry grinned. He held his wand up to his throat like an announcer. “ 'Last time we tried to arrest him, only half of us died; we're hoping for a better ratio this time!' ”

Ginny and Ron chuckled, but Hermione looked annoyed. “It's hardly a laughing matter. We're supposed to all be on the same side, you know!”

“According to Mars, CADS is under the control of Dolohov. Not really ally material, if you ask me,” replied Ginny.

Hermione shuddered at the mention of the name. Dolohov had nearly killed her with a curse last year.

“Actually, Ginny, Mars told Dumbledore that a wizard named Spikes was steering Lennon around, and that he reported to Dolohov,” said Harry.

“Spikes?” said Hermione. “Any idea what he looks like?”

Harry shook his head.

“It's not that common a name. I wonder if he's related to our darling head girl,” suggested Hermione acidly.

“Probably—and, speaking of her, I'm sure Ester was using the Listening Charm to eavesdrop on us Friday at breakfast,” said Harry.

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I got the same 'being-watched' feeling I had when Mars used that spell to hear what McGonagall was telling us about our punishments. Only the feeling was much stronger on Friday. I saw someone dash away from the entrance to the hall, so I chased after them. When I reached the corridor, Ester was the only one headed away from the Great Hall,” explained Harry.

“You can tell when someone casts that spell on you?” asked Ron.

Harry nodded.

“You must have felt it stronger from Ester because she's not as good at it as Mars. Have you ever had that feeling before, Harry?” asked Hermione.

“Yeah, on the Hogwarts Express, right before you three went to do your prefect duties. Luna said she felt it too.”

The Weasley siblings looked impressed, but Hermione seemed to be thinking deeply as they finished their breakfast and started off to Defense Against the Dark Arts. As they neared the classroom, Hermione asked, “What were we talking about Friday at breakfast?”

Ron shrugged. Harry said he had been busy trying to discover who was eavesdropping, so he hadn't really been listened.

Ginny, however, piped in, “We were talking about what we were going to do in Hogsmeade. Ron was drooling over Honeydukes, Harry wanted to see the Shrieking Shack again, and you mentioned needing to visit the quill shop.”

“Which is where I was attacked,” said Hermione plainly before leading them into

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the classroom.

Mars arrived and greeted the class in his normal fashion. Ron and Neville led their group to the lab; Hermione and Padma went to their corner to work on the UAS system; and Harry sat at his table and started looking through the book Mars had given him. Harry had mastered the Reverse Transfiguration Spell during his last lesson, and Mars had assigned him an entire book on Fire Charms. Some were very simple and just conjured smoke to obscure your enemy's vision; but others were very complex and dangerous, such as the Wall of Flame and the Spontaneous Combustion charm. Mars even hinted at teaching Harry how to summon a meteor swarm.

Mars spent almost the entire class working with Harry on the Smoke Cloud charm, leaving only once, to reverse a hex that Seamus had put on Colin accidentally.

When the bell rang Hermione asked Ron and Harry to come with her to speak with Mars. Luna and Ginny were already chatting with him when they came up to his desk.

“Mars, can you tell us what happened when you went to fetch Professor Snape?” asked Hermione. The other teenagers nodded eagerly.

“Certainly, Hermione. We have CADS infiltrated very well—of course, so do the Donnies. I knew right where they were likely to keep Severus, and which wards were used to protect the area. So I apparated to a place where I knew I wouldn't be detected, and deactivated the magical defenses.

“I reached Severus undiscovered, and had no problem surprising and dispatching the two wizards that were guarding him. I gave him one of their wands and he apparated to just outside the school. I then looked around until I found his wand and the port-key they'd used to escape from Hogwarts.

“Before I left, I inscribed a very nasty glyph on Lennon's office door. I doubt she has anyone who knows how to remove it. She should be furious at not being able to use her own office,” Mars twinkled.

“Why did you want to find the port-key?” asked Ron.

“So he could come back directly to Hogwarts,” answered Ginny.

“Actually, I wanted it so they couldn't use it to come back directly at a later date,” said Mars.

“What's a glyph?” asked Hermione.

“Glyphs are ancient symbol magic,” Luna spoke up. “It's a system that was developed by the Egyptians more than three thousand years ago. They're many times more powerful than runes.”

“Very good, Luna,” said Mars. The others looked impressed.

“Mars went back in time and taught Salazar Slytherin and Godric Gryffindor the secret of glyphs so they could use them to protect Hogwarts,” Luna added.

Mars frowned. “Luna, that's ridiculous. I've never traveled backwards in time. You must stop listening to those stupid rumors. I've never killed a dragon either, much less when I was seven or nine or however young the daily gossip makes it out to be. To tell you the truth, I quite like the big lizards, and besides, Charlie would never forgive me if I ever did hurt one.” Mars winked at Ron and Ginny. Luna, however, didn't seem to be listening to him.

“Can you tell us about the factions in the Death Eaters? Do they really work against each other at times?” asked Hermione.

“Well, I guess y'all can spend break with me. Pull up your desks, and I'll tell you what we've been able to piece together so far,” said Mars.

Once the students were seated, Mars explained about the three factions within the ranks of Voldemort's followers. The first faction they were familiar with: it was the one lead by Lucius Malfoy. Those Death Eaters who had escaped punishment after the fall of Voldemort and carried on in Britain's wizarding society largely looked to Malfoy as Voldemort's chief lieutenant. Mars suggested that Malfoy had not been entirely happy to

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see his Dark Lord return; he had fancied himself the new champion of the pure bloods.

“Malfoy? The leader of the army of darkness?” asked Hermione skeptically.

“Do not confuse the father and the son. Draco is a pathetic prima donna, but his father is extremely astute. Lucius is no wizard of great power; he is skilled, but he is no Barty Crouch or Bella Lestrage. However, he makes up for this with his cunning.”

Mars explained that Lucius was in good standing with Voldemort now because of the intelligence he had gained by using Snape as the fool. Malfoy had also gained points with his master when his wife Narcissa delivered the information that tricked Harry into going to the department of mysteries.

Blame for the failure to procure the prophecy was largely placed at the feet of the Lestrage clique. This faction included Rodolfuss Lestrage, his wife Bella, and his brother Rabastan at the head. The group included several others that had rotted in Azkaban. From what Mars had heard, Wormtail was also involved in this faction, but he had been in hiding—even from his fellow Death Eaters—ever since it had become known that Sirius' old friend, Mars himself, was back in Britain.

Mars considered this faction to be the most loyal to Voldemort. Many of its members had learned the dark arts from their master, and were almost fanatical in his service. The three Lestrages were also among the most powerful wizards and witches in Europe. Mars claimed that Bellatrix could almost have been capable of rivaling Tom Riddle himself if there had been more than just air between her ears. But, as Mars had stated, the destruction of the prophecy had lowered their standing with Voldemort.

The last faction was lead by Antonin Dolohov, whom Mars said was both powerful and clever. Dolohov loved combat, and, unlike Malfoy, often led the charge during battles. Several of the escapees of Azkaban were counted among his followers, as were quite a few foreign wizards, especially those from Eastern Europe. His greatest henchman was Reginald Spikes. Like Dolohov, he was both intelligent and magically powerful. He

had always been suspected of being a Voldemort supporter, but no one had ever been able to prove it. Mars said he was a close confidant of Jo Anne Lennon, and also the major funding source for her Committee Against Dark Sorcerers.

“Is he related to Ester Spikes, our head girl?” spat Hermione.

“Oh, yes; he's her father. Both are red-headed and meaner looking than a chimera,” answered Mars.

“The Daily Prophet hints that open hostility has often broken out between the factions, but it's not really true,” Mars continued. “They are too cowed by Riddle to fight each other flagrantly. The Alliance has tried to make some of our raids look like factional fighting, but it seems to have only fooled the newspapers, and not the Donnies.”

“Where did you learn to use glyphs?” asked Ginny.

“The same place that Slytherin and Gryffindor did. Now y'all need to get moving. Break is just about over.”

They bid their teacher goodbye and walked into the hall.

“Luna?” asked Hermione carefully.

“Yes?” said Luna.

“Do you know where someone could learn to use glyphs?” asked Hermione.

Luna let out a small giggle and admitted, “Well, no. Only a small order of Egyptian wizards ever knew the secrets of glyph magic. They never told anyone outside of their own sect. Their king, Ramsieve, ordered them to kill themselves upon his death so no one could break into his tomb.”

Harry and Ron looked aghast.

“And they all did?” asked Ginny, wide-eyed.

Luna nodded. “They were quite fanatical, I hear.”

“But they did unseal that tomb. Bill did it in his second year with Gringotts. It got him a nice promotion,” said Ron. Ginny nodded.

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“Yes, he did,” said Luna matter of factly. “But it helps when your best friend is Mars, doesn't it?”

She smiled and walked down the corridor.

“If everyone who knew the secrets has been dead for 3,000 years, then how does a twenty-eight year old American learn them?” asked Hermione.

“And how would Slytherin and Gryffindor know? They certainly weren't around 3,000 years ago,” said Harry.

“Well at least we know they both learned it from the same place,” Ginny shrugged. She waved goodbye and headed toward the dungeons for her Potions class.

On the way to breakfast the next morning Harry noticed Ron and Hermione holding hands. Harry had known for years that they fancied each other, but Ron had always been thick when it came to girls. Harry supposed that their recent brush with death must have finally convinced Ron to examine his feelings. Either that, or the shock of seeing Ron come within an inch of the Killing Curse had caused Hermione to force the issue. Either way, in Harry's opinion it was –

“Not before time!” said Ginny, as if reading his mind. She smiled warmly at him. Harry returned the smile and followed his friends into the Great Hall.

At breakfast Hermione found another headline in the Daily Prophet that was worth reading aloud. “Minister of Magic issues full pardons to Hogwarts Professors Severus Snape and Mars,” she read.

“Bet that upset Lennon a bit,” said Harry.

“It doesn't mention her or CADS in the article, but I agree. It must have been a tough decision for Fudge to make,” suggested Hermione.

“It doesn't sound too hard to me, Hermione,” Ron said as he passed the milk jug to Mark Evans. “Who would you be more afraid of? Jo Anne Lennon and CADS, or Dumbledore and Mars?”

Chapter Twenty – Failure of the FireBolt



That coming Saturday the first, and in Harry's opinion the biggest, Quidditch match of the year would take place. The Gryffindors had beaten their arch-rivals, the Slytherins, five straight times, and as the match neared, the tensions between the houses grew. Several members of the Gryffindor team were hexed in the back while walking to classes. Colin Creevey was hit with the Jelly Legs curse, while Jack Sloper suffered from sneezing fits so bad that his nose bled for three entire days. Millicent Bulstrode had tried to jinx Ginny Weasley, but Ginny was too fast for her: Ginny dodged the curse and nailed the Slytherin full in the face with the Bat Bogey hex.

After Mars found out about Millicent's attempt to hex Ginny, he issued a stern warning to all the students in the school. The inter-house squabbling incensed him, and he declared that any Slytherins or Gryffindors caught fighting or jinxing each other before or during the coming match would be used for target practice during his Defense Against the

Dark Arts classes. This pronouncement ended the curses, but not the trash talk.

The threats and insults still seemed to bother Ron, but at least his great performance in winning the Quidditch Cup in his fifth year had brought an end to the Slytherin singing of the “Weasley is our king” song. Draco had written the hateful song before the Gryffindor-Slytherin match last year, and had taught all the other Slytherins to sing it. The vicious insults about Ron's ability and his family had unnerved him so badly that he didn't play well until the year's last match. Harry and Ginny, on the other hand, were having no problems handling their own hecklers; in fact, Harry thought the two of them gave better than they got when it came to taunting.

Harry had himself been given so much homework that he had no time to worry about the upcoming match, and it was upon him before he knew it. When Saturday morning arrived, he suddenly felt excitement again rushing through him. Nothing got Harry's innards buzzing like a Quidditch match; he practically sprinted down to breakfast.

The only Gryffindor team member that appeared anxious was Ron. Even though he had played the year before, this was to be his first match as captain. His nerves were clearly getting to him. Colin Creevey, on the other hand, the only Gryffindor to be playing in his first Quidditch match, didn't seem nervous at all. He and his brother both chatted excitedly about his broomstick throughout breakfast.

“Oh my,” said Ginny, looking surprised. The others looked up at her, then in the direction she was staring. Luna was approaching them wearing her most outlandish hat yet. It was the same lion that she had worn last year to the Slytherin-Gryffindor match, but it now had a snake in its mouth. All the Gryffindors except Hermione were staring at it with their mouths open. Hermione moved closer to Ron and put her hand on his shoulder.

“I'm supporting Gryffindor today,” said Luna proudly. “With a little help from Mars I've managed to get the lion to chew on the serpent.” She looped her wand in the air

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and tapped the hat. The lion's jaws opened and closed while the snake twitched about, hissing angrily. Everyone at the table except Harry and Ginny looked disturbed by Luna's demonstration; Harry and Ginny simply smiled.

“Nice transfiguration, Luna,” said Ginny with a giggle.

Luna thanked her, wished them all luck, and with a parting glance at Ron, wandered out of the great hall.

“That girl's one stick short of a bundle, I'm telling you,” said Ron, shaking his head.

Harry grinned at Ginny.

When breakfast was nearly over, Ron stood up and ordered the team to the locker room. As they walked out of the hall, the Gryffindors cheered loudly for them, easily drowning out the boos from the Slytherins. Hermione and Colin's brother Dennis accompanied the team across the grounds. Before they entered the locker room, Hermione wished Ron good luck and kissed him on the cheek; then she and Dennis headed for the stands.

They quickly changed into their Quidditch robes and Ron stood before the team. He went over some last minute reminders about the most important plays and then apologized rather meekly for not being very good at pep talks.

Ginny quickly came to his rescue. She roused up the team's spirits by reminding them of all the dirty tricks Slytherins had pulled on them over the years. She brought up Professor Snape's horrible treatment of Gryffindors, and urged them to imagine his humiliation when he had to hand the Quidditch Cup over to Professor McGonagall yet again. Nothing, Ginny claimed, was better than putting a Slytherin in their place, just as she had done with that hag Millicent Bultstrode. The team applauded and loudly yelled their approval. They burst out onto the pitch revved up and ready to get after their opponents.

Katie, Ron, and Ginny walked to mid-pitch to meet Madam Hooch, the referee, and the Slytherin captain, who was none other than Draco Malfoy. As usual, Crabbe and Goyle followed behind the approaching Malfoy like a pair of slackjawed henchmen. Madam Hooch told the captains she wanted a clean match, and ordered them to shake hands. Following the precedent set by past Gryffindor and Slytherin captains, Ron and Draco each tried to crush the other's fingers. The larger Ron seemed to be getting the best of his rival when Draco's other hand flew out and grabbed Ron's robes. Ron reciprocated and the two grappled with each other. Crabbe, Goyle, Katie and Ginny started to converge on the two.

BANG!

Madam Hooch lowered her wand. She gave the two captains a harsh look.

“Have you lot forgotten what Professor Mars promised to anyone fighting before or during the match? Which of you wants to be his jinx target?”

Ron and Draco immediately let go of each other.

Madam Hooch went into a lengthy tirade about good sportsmanship. Harry quickly tired of the lecture and started flying around the pitch. As he flew by the Gryffindor stands, he waved at Dean, Neville, Mark and Mary. Hermione seemed to be staring too intently at Ron on the ground to notice Harry. He then passed the Slytherin crowd, who, as expected, jeered at him viciously, but he also noticed Heather Parkinson and her friends giving him a friendly wave. He quickly returned the greeting, knowing full well that Pansy Parkinson would soon put a stop to their good will gesture.

Harry then glanced over at Hagrid's cabin and spotted Mars and Hagrid walking toward the forbidden forest, deep in conversation. Shortly after they entered the forest, Harry saw many of the trees in that area swaying back and forth, despite the lack of wind. They seemed to be moving their boughs like appendages. Harry looked closer. Maybe, he thought, giants were in the forest moving the trees. He had certainly seen Grawp bend

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trees like drinking straws.

“Harry, wake up!” yelled Jack Sloper as he raced near him, wielding his bat. He swerved in front of Harry and struck a bludger that had been barreling straight at Harry's face. Sloper's aim was not very good, and the bludger sped away, not at a Slytherin player, but toward Ginny Weasley. She quickly employed the sloth grip roll to avoid a broken jaw, and sped away, scowling.

Harry slapped himself twice and swore in anger. He couldn't believe he had missed the release of the balls. He zoomed around the pitch with his sharp eyes peering in every nook and cranny for the elusive golden snitch. From the little attention Harry dared to spare away from his search he could tell that Ron's plays seemed to be working well.

After thirty minutes Gryffindor was up seventy to ten. The big lead gave Harry the confidence to try a move he had wanted to use ever since he saw Viktor Krum pull it off at the Quidditch World Cup over two years ago: The Wrongski Feint. It was named after the famous Polish Seeker, Josef Wrongski, and it entailed tricking the other Seeker into thinking you were diving for the snitch and racing you to the ground. At the last moment you hopefully pulled out of the dive and the rival seeker would slam violently into the ground. Krum had used the move twice with excellent results in the Championship Game.

Harry looked about until he spotted Malfoy zipping around near the grass at mid-pitch. Harry made several sharp turns as though he was following the snitch. Malfoy took the bait and zoomed after him. Harry took a steep angle to gain altitude. Malfoy was very close behind him when Harry began an almost completely vertical power dive. He heard the crowd gasp as he descended, and felt Malfoy nipping at his heels.

Harry slowed slightly to allow the Slytherin seeker to catch up to him. About twenty-five feet from the ground, Harry pulled up hard on his broomstick, praying that he could complete the maneuver without breaking his neck. He heard screams from the crowd as he skimmed the grass. He had to lift his feet onto his broom to avoid scraping

the ground. With all his strength, Harry strained to pull his broom out of the dive, fighting both gravity and momentum.

WHAM!

Draco tried too late to pull up and hit the ground hard just as Harry succeeded in fighting his broom back into the air.

Madam Hooch declared a timeout, called for the quaffle to be passed to her, and immobilized the bludgers with her wand. Madam Pomfrey looked cross as she ran out to treat Malfoy. Harry climbed higher on his Firebolt, getting the thumbs-up sign from Ginny and Ron as he passed them. Once he was above the rest of the players, he scanned the area unmolested.

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Harry saw no sign of the snitch, but his attention was again drawn to the forest. A thestral was flying just above the treetops, and it had a tall, red-robed rider on its back. Harry knew it had to be Mars. Below the rider, the trees were again moving wildly in all directions, as though they were being bent by dozens of giants. Mars and the thestral gained altitude and grew fainter as they flew off into the distance. Harry wondered what was going on.

Ginny suddenly screamed his name and Harry looked in her direction. He saw a bludger speeding straight at his head and tried a belated evasive maneuver, but it was too late and the bludger struck him solidly on the right shoulder. Harry felt his shoulder separate; he suspected that a few of his ribs had been cracked. He managed somehow to stay on his broom and fly himself free of the bludger's pursuit.

Harry was furious that he had twice allowed himself to be so distracted. Now he was injured, his left arm was useless, and he saw that Malfoy was back in the match. He decided that it would be best if he just shadowed Malfoy for a while. If Harry couldn't catch the snitch himself, he could at least manage to keep Malfoy from catching it for a while. If he denied Malfoy long enough for Gryffindor's chasers to build a 160 point lead, then if Malfoy obtained the snitch it wouldn't decide the match.

Harry spotted Draco flying around the Gryffindor goals, and sped after him. He endured the pain as he chased Malfoy around the pitch and stands. Over the next twenty minutes, Harry's pain grew increasingly worse. The only thing that kept him going was knowing that the Gryffindor chasers were dominating the battle for the quaffle. They were in the lead, 180 to 30; only one more goal was needed to have enough of a lead that Harry could let Draco catch the snitch. Twice Harry had pushed Malfoy off his course in pursuit of the golden ball, and both times the physical contact had caused so much pain that Harry had come close to passing out.

Malfoy swerved suddenly and sped straight at the Gryffindor stands. Harry zoomed

after him as quickly as he could. Malfoy dove, and Harry followed as they traveled the length of the field. As Harry reached Malfoy's side he saw it: the golden snitch. It was three feet in front of them and trying desperately to give them the slip. The walnut sized ball zigged and zagged, rose and fell, but the side-by-side seekers stayed closely on its tail.

They tried frantically to bump each other off course, all the while slowly gaining on the prize. It was now barely a foot ahead of the tips of their broomsticks and Harry changed his plan: instead of just blocking Malfoy, he was going to catch the snitch himself.

His legs gripped the Firebolt tightly and he reached his one working arm out ahead of him. His straining fingers were just inches away from the ball when Malfoy grabbed his hand and pulled himself even with Harry. Harry struggled to shake off Malfoy's grip, but his injured shoulder and ribs burned hot with pain with each contortion. To his growing horror, Harry saw Draco slowly reach out with his free hand and grab the golden snitch between forefinger and thumb. Malfoy immediately let go of Harry and flew high into the air, showing the delirious Slytherin crowd the hopelessly struggling ball.

Harry quickly looked at the board. Surely one of the Chasers had scored while he and Malfoy were side by side battling it out! His heart sank as he landed his broom on the ground. A Chaser had scored, but it was a Slytherin chaser. The board now read Slytherin 190, Gryffindor 180. Harry collapsed on the ground in despair. The adrenaline that had kept him moving despite his injuries now left him. Not only had he lost for the first time to Slytherin, but it was Malfoy that had beaten him.

Harry felt that he had wasted his teammates' tremendous effort. They had been winning by 150 points, and he blew it because of his injuries—injuries he had received by not paying attention to the game. It was something that might be forgivable in a first year player like Colin, but this was Harry's sixth year as Seeker and he should have known

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better! He was furious with himself as Madam Pomfrey and his teammates approached.

“Harry, are you all right?” asked Colin, landing near him.

Harry tried to reply but he was losing consciousness. The last thing he remembered was Ginny and Ron looking down fearfully at him while Madam Pomfrey examined his shoulder.

When Harry awoke in the hospital he had no idea how long he had been there. Ginny, Ron and Hermione were all waiting in chairs near his bed. He was very sore, but the agonizing pain was no longer with him. His friends approached. Ginny grabbed his hand and held it, explaining that he had been unconscious for five or so hours. She told him that Madam Pomfrey said he responded well to his treatment and that he would be able to leave the hospital Monday morning.

Harry apologized over and over for blowing the game. Ron and Ginny insisted that he was not to blame, although they did ask what had distracted him. He informed the three of them what he had seen with Mars, Hagrid and the trees.

“Do you think Hagrid convinced more giants to come to our side?” asked Ron.

“And he's keeping them all in Forbidden Forest?” Hermione shuddered. “Grawp was bad enough by himself.”

Harry agreed completely.

Tuesday evening Harry was walking back from the library, still mad at himself for losing the Quidditch match, when he heard two girls complaining about something. Their voices, which sounded very familiar, were coming from down a short corridor. Harry crept into the hall, keeping in the shadows, and saw the first years, Mary Sue and Heather, in a cross corridor to his right. Mary was scrubbing the floor—another detention; no doubt; Heather was looking down the far end of the corridor, away from Harry.

“What are you doing?” Mary was asking.

“Never mind what I'm doing, I want to know where's she going this time of night!”

Heather answered shortly.

“Who?” asked Mary.

“Our favorite bossy, frizzy-haired prefect,” answered Heather rather nastily.

“What do we care what she's doing? We're already in detention, you know.”

“Yes, I know! I also remember it being your mistake that got us caught,” retorted Heather.

“Like you haven't landed us in detention three times as much as I have?” said Mary defensively.

“Shh, I'm trying to see which way she's headed.”

“Would you just forget about Hermione Granger for now.”

“I can't believe *you* said that to me. You're like her stalker or something. You know more about her than about yourself, Mary.”

“And you know perfectly well why I keep an eye on her,” snapped Mary.

“Yeah, you're her little fangirl,” Heather giggled.

“Ho, ho,” said Mary sarcastically. “She's up to something, with Snape I think, I just don't know what yet. I can't believe that Harry and Mars actually trust her.”

“Your fixation with her is starting to scare me, Mary.”

“Oh, shut up, will you?” said Mary. She paused. “Which way did she go?”

“Down that hall, which is why I noticed. That corridor only leads to two places, the kitchen and the Slytherin Common Room. She's too much of a goody to nick food, I'd think, and muggleborns aren't really welcomed around my lot, I'm afraid,” Heather said rather sadly.

“No good reason for her to go either place, really,” said Mary as she abandoned her scrub brush and joined Heather at the end of the hall.

“Only one way to find out.”

“What's in your mind, Heather?”

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“You skive off to the kitchen to ask the elves if they've seen her, and I'll check my Common Room.”

“But we're supposed to be scrubbing these floors in detention,” said Mary nervously.

“Oh, Filch won't come back in the three minutes we'll be gone. C'mon, chicken,” Heather teased, starting down the hall.

“I'm not chicken!” insisted Mary, following the Slytherin.

Harry waited in the shadows for another minute to be sure the coast was clear. Just as he was about to follow after them, he heard footsteps approaching from the left, opposite the way Mary and Heather had gone. Seconds later Snape passed him, heading down the passage after the girls.

Harry desperately wanted to warn his students about Snape's arrival. He racked his brain fruitlessly, but before he could think of a way to warn them, he heard the girls returning. To his surprise, Snape was not with them.

“How did she just disappear like that?” demanded Heather.

“Maybe there's a secret passage?” offered Mary.

“No, I don't think so. This was Mark's area to check for secret doors; you know how good he is at finding them,” replied Heather.

“But not all the doors will open by touch, Heather. Some need words; I bet that's what it is. Hermione's a devious one, you know,” said Mary.

“We still need to find the door itself though. Do you have any more of that tracking dust left? With that, Hermione would lead us right to it next time,” suggested Heather.

“No, we used it all on that git, Draco. We'll need to make some more. It's your turn to steal the ingredients from Snape, by the way,” said Mary matter-of-factly as she picked up her brush and started scrubbing again.

“Are you sure? Snape almost caught me last time!” squeaked Heather. “Maybe we

could sweet talk Mark into doing it? All the teachers love him, you know.”

“Yes, I'm sure it's your turn, and quit being such a drama queen!”

“What's a drama queen?”

“Never mind. Help me finish this scrubbing! Filch will be back soon to check on us.”

Harry was amused as he left the first-year girls to their squabbling. Maybe Mars had a point after all when he said they took after him?

Chapter Twenty-One – Prepare for the Worst



The rest of November passed quickly for Harry. Between schoolwork, quidditch and the training from Mars, each day was jam-packed with work and activities. Harry learned the Engorgement Charm, how to animate small objects, and many minor fire charms; he had made a pepper-up potion and studied too many boring things about the stars in Astronomy class.

It was a busy month for the others as well. Ron's schedule was nearly as full as Harry's, plus he had the quidditch captaincy and his prefect duties.

Sometimes in brief moments, Harry would fondly remember wasting time with Ron on such leisurely activities as Wizard Chess, but then his hectic present life would crash down on him again. There was simply no time even for remembering goofing off! Ginny, like her brother, had quidditch practice and prefect duties filling her time. On top of that, she was also preparing for her OWLs at the end of the year. Hermione, however, had the most work to do. For the past two years she had always taken one more class than Harry and Ron, but now she had three more. In addition, she and Padma were studying Mars' totally unfathomable (to Harry, anyway) Unified Astronomical Somatics System. As hard as Mars had worked Harry and the others, it was paltry compared to what he expected of Padma and Hermione. Hermione was spending almost as much time with Padma as she was with her three best friends. The work didn't seem to bother her, though; in fact Harry had never seen Hermione happier.

Even though Harry was constantly in danger of falling behind in his studies, his spirits were high. For the first time he felt that proper preparation for the War was underway. Hogwarts students were really being trained to defend themselves. Dumbledore and Mars seemed to be a step ahead of their enemies, and Mars was following through on his promise to keep Harry in the loop. While Harry couldn't yet see how they would defeat Voldemort and his Death Eaters, he just couldn't imagine that anyone could manage to defeat the union of Dumbledore and Mars.

Early in December, when Harry and the others arrived for Double Defense Against the Dark Arts, Harry immediately knew something was different. Mars wore a very concerned look in place of his usual grin. When Neville and Ron started to lead the majority of the class to the lab, Mars stopped them.

“We're going to depart from the lesson plan today. I've been extremely negligent in not teaching you how to deal with one of Tom Riddle's most terrifying servants: Dementors. Everyone to your desks, if you please.”

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A few of the students looked a bit unnerved at the mention of the foul spirits, but no one winced noticeably – they all remembered Mars' lecture about hearing Voldemort's name. Once everyone was seated, he addressed them. “How many of you managed to conjure a corporeal patronus last year?”

Harry, Hermione, Cho, and Padma raised their hands.

“Only four of you? Well, we're going to work on raising that number this week. Just remember, it's a lot different casting the Patronus Charm in a classroom than when you have a dementor trying to kill you. They suck all the happiness out of you and make you despair; they try to make you feel that giving up hope is your best option.

“This is both a strength and a weakness for the dementors. It is a strength because the easiest defense against them is the Patronus Charm, which requires a strong, happy thought in the mind of the caster. Thus, their attack makes the most likely defense harder to use. It is also a weakness, because anything that depends so completely on despair and sadness for its attack cannot stand against even the appearance of hope, courage or good will. Dementors, you see, lack all redeeming qualities, particularly bravery. As soon as they see the tide turn against them, their fierce demeanor fades and they flee. You never have to fight off an entire group of Dementors; once you defeat around half of them, the rest will abandon their fellows without hesitation or guilt.”

Mars split the class into halves. Harry helped one half learn the charm, while Mars took the other. Soon Katie, Parvati and Terry Boot had each managed to conjure a true patronus. At the end of class, Ron and Ginny were both put out that they had not been able to manage a corporeal protector, but Harry assured them that they were very close.

Snow finally fell on Hogwarts during the second week of December. There had been fear that there would not be a white Christmas this year, so the students rejoiced in the arrival of the white crystals and started many a snowball fight in celebration. Ron and Ginny, along with Neville and a few others, had successfully conjured a corporeal

patronus in Defense Against the Dark Arts that morning; this, along with the long-awaited snowfall, had Harry, Hermione and Ron in excellent spirits as they trudged out to Hagrid's cabin for class Monday afternoon.

Hagrid greeted the students and led them around his cabin to his paddock. Inside were several hippogriffs, tethered to the fence. Their fierce eyes stared at the approaching group. Harry admired their beautiful gleaming coats of bronze, pinkish roan, gleaming chestnut, inky black, and stormy gray. The gray one looked very familiar to Harry...in fact, he would swear that it was –

“Buckbeak!” squealed Hermione, running up to the fence. “Oh Hagrid, is it really him?”

“It's Beaky alright. He jus' arrived last night,” Hagrid beamed.

Hermione climbed over the fence and approached Buckbeak. She looked him in the eyes for a few seconds and then bowed to him. Buckbeak stared at her unblinkingly with his orange eyes for a moment, and then buckled his scaly knees into a bow. Hermione hurried forward and stroked his feathery neck as she spoke soothingly to him.

Hagrid and the rest of the class climbed the fence and approached Hermione and the hippogriff. Blaise, Sally-Anne and Susan Bones all bowed to Buckbeak and, once he returned their bows, started petting him alongside Hermione.

“Hagrid,” said Hermione, leaving Buckbeak and approaching the giant, “are you sure it's safe for Buckbeak to be here?”

“Yeah,” said Dean. “I thought the Ministry ordered his execution. Isn't he a fugitive?”

“Not no more. Professor Mars flew in with him last night. They surprised me by knocking at me door round midnight. I nearly snuffed it, I was so happy! He also had with him a pardon signed by the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge himself. Buckbeak is now totally free,” said Hagrid, fat tears of joys rolling down his whiskery face.

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After the class had celebrated Buckbeak's return, Hagrid explained that he wanted to go over hippogriffs again because they had never completed the planned lessons. Hagrid stared at the ground as he explained this, looking embarrassed.

“Don't go blaming yourself for that, Hagrid,” said Blaise. “It was all Malfoy's fault!”

“He was barely injured anyways. He kept bragging all year about how he fooled everyone,” spat Sally-Anne.

The rest of the class had gradually grown accustomed to the friendliness of the two Slytherin girls, but this was the first time that they had spoken so openly against Malfoy. Harry smiled at them and nodded his agreement.

Hagrid went into a detailed lecture about hippogriffs. Harry, Hermione and Ron already knew much of what Hagrid was explaining, since they had, after all, lived with Buckbeak for a month last summer at the ancestral Black estate. However, the three still enjoyed the class; Hagrid's teaching skills had improved dramatically this year, and having his class limited to students who liked the subject made it much easier.

After class, the three had tea with Hagrid in his cabin. They sat around his table, chatting merrily about Buckbeak; the teenagers all complimented Hagrid on how well his class had gone this year. He blushed a bit as he stood up to refill the kettle and placed it on the fire. While his back was turned, Hermione elbowed Harry in the ribs, bobbed her head in Hagrid's direction and then at the window that looked out toward the Forbidden Forest. Harry nodded at her, and when Hagrid was walking back from the fireplace, he asked him a question.

“Hagrid, what were you and Mars doing in the forest three weeks ago?”

“Don't know whatcha mean, Harry,” answered Hagrid nervously.

“During the first quidditch match I saw you and Mars go into the forest. The trees were moving about you as you walked through it.”

Hagrid flinched as Harry said this. He looked anxious. Harry paused to study his face, then continued. "They were moving like giants were bending them. You know how Grawp is with trees?"

Hagrid looked blank.

"Hagrid," Hermione said kindly. "Are you bringing giants to live in the Forbidden Forest? To keep your half-brother happy, maybe?"

A look of relief passed over Hagrid's face. He smiled and winked at Hermione.

"Now, yeh remember I warned yeh about being so nosy. I understand that yeh want ter help, but leave the defense of the forest to me and Mars."

"Defense?" mused Harry quietly. He, Ron, and Hermione exchanged inquisitive looks.

"C'mon," said the giant. "Let's get some supper."

Harry wasn't sure what to make of Hagrid's reaction. He had looked so nervous when Harry brought up the forest, then relieved when Hermione had asked about the giants. It just didn't add up. Sitting at the Gryffindor table, he, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny quietly discussed the matter.

"Why would they want to defend the forest?" asked Ron.

"Well, it is one of the ways into Hogwarts," suggested Hermione.

"It sounds like they're expecting a battle there. I wonder why?" puzzled Ginny.

"I think I know," said Harry slowly. "I had a dream about a battle in the forest. The centaurs were fighting trolls and Death Eaters. Mars visited me in the dream, right in the middle of the fight." He looked to see if either of the girls were surprised about Mars entering his dreams, but they didn't react, so he continued. "He told me I was seeing a future possibility, and that he had been training me subliminally as a Seer for months."

"Did he think your vision was likely to happen?" asked Hermione.

Harry nodded.

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“Why wouldn't he tell you about the training, Harry?” said Ginny.

“That's the way they train Seers,” said Hermione. “They don't tell them at first; sometimes they even go for years without knowing. It's supposed to work better that way. I read all about prophecies and divination training this summer. You know, once I found out prophecies were true.”

“Mars said that Seers in training can get too egotistical, so it's better to teach them without them knowing what's going on,” Harry confirmed.

“Everything does seem to happen to you, doesn't it, Harry?” said Ginny as they stood.

“A forest full of giants?” pondered Ron on their way out of the Great Hall.

That night Harry and Ron were again summoned to train on the Cruciatus Curse with Mars. They had both been very close to casting it last time, even without help from Mars, so they had high hopes of success tonight. Two hours into the lesson, Harry managed to cast the spell unaided. The Grim was furious and lunged viciously at Harry. Its evil eyes bore into Harry's skull and Harry felt fear creeping up inside of him, but he shook off the beast's gaze and continued the curse until Mars told him to stop.

“Excellent, Harry,” said Mars, patting him on the shoulder. “Sit down and take a rest for a bit. Winky! Could you bring us some butterbeers please?”

Winky stepped from behind one of the counters and left the room. Harry hadn't even known Winky was in the lab with them. She returned shortly with the beers, and Mars handed one to Harry. Mars told Ron he still had to earn his.

A little more than an hour later, Ron had his butterbeer. As with Harry, the Grim went wild and it pummeled Ron with its gaze, but Ron held out against the fear and did not falter. Afterward, Mars congratulated them as they finished off the butterbeers; they returned to their dorm via the fireplace.

As Harry laid down for a quick two-hour nap before breakfast, he pondered Mars'

parting words. Mars had told them that they were finished with the Cruciatus Curse, and next time they would start learning the Killing Curse, Avada Kedavra. Harry worried: even if he could learn that terrible curse, could he cast it when the time came?

It was the last week before the Christmas holidays, and the castle was full of festive spirit. Giant Christmas trees were placed amongst the halls and decorated gorgeously with ribbons, tinsel, and real fairies. The fairies twinkled in varying lights and all sang happily whenever Lilandria was near. Flitwick and Mars were trying, hopeless as it appeared, to teach the suits of armor to sing in tune the Christmas carols that they had learned two years ago; and all but the grumpiest of paintings were dressed in holiday colors and bidding best wishes to the passing students.

Despite the cheery mood, that Wednesday night many students in the advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts class were nervous. Friday was the last day of the term, and on that day Mars would be testing all of them. They would each be required to stand in front of the class and say Voldemort's name loud and clearly, without flinching. Harry had been saying the name for years, but most of the other students were still uncomfortable with it. A few had even complained to the Headmaster, but Dumbledore agreed with Mars that the notion of being frightened by saying or hearing Voldemort's name was not only silly but damaging. The assignment stood; and many Gryffindors could be heard whispering the Dark Lord's name in the Common room as Harry climbed the stairs to his dormitory. He shook his head; whispering would not be nearly good enough for Mars on Friday.

Early Thursday, around one in the morning, Harry awoke trying to remember the dream in which Mars had just visited him. As usual, he had told Harry to wake Ron and meet him in the Common room, but this time his demeanor had been very different—he seemed concerned and anxious. Of the dream that Mars had interrupted, Harry could only remember speaking to a tall blond woman, who looked vaguely familiar, in front a

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fireplace; he could remember nothing else, so he gave up and woke Ron. Both he and Ron were confused by this night's summons because they had just been summoned two days previously for the late night training sessions. Normally Mars allowed them more time to recover. Their consternation grew when Neville also got out of bed, smiling at them as he joined them on the staircase.

In the Common Room, they were greeted, not by the lone figure of Mars, as they expected, but by Hermione and Ginny, who were staring at them with concerned faces. Hermione immediately went to Ron and hugged him tightly. “Did Mars seem nervous to you, Ron?” she asked.

“I didn't speak with him. Ask them,” answered Ron, pointing at Neville and Harry, who both nodded.

“He seemed almost scared, to me,” added Ginny anxiously.

“What could possibly could scare a wizard like Mars?” asked Ron.

“The realization that your students are in danger due to your own incompetence,” came a deep voice from the direction of the Fat Lady's painting. Mars, looking grim with concern, held the painting open for Padma, Luna and Ernie McMillan.

“Mars, you can't let Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs into our tower. We're all sworn to secrecy,” said Ron in surprise.

“The silly secrets that the Houses keep from each other will all become moot in a few months, Ron. Besides, these three have been in this tower many times before tonight.”

Neville walked up to Ernie and shook his hand firmly. Luna and Ginny greeted each other with a hug, as did Hermione and Padma.

“As I said during class, casting the Patronus Charm is much more difficult when a dementor is trying to drive you into despair. Until you can cast the charm under real-life conditions, I do not consider your training complete,” said Mars.

“How can you manage that?” asked Hermione.

“Professor Lupin used a Boggart to simulate a dementor for me,” said Harry.

“Not everyone's greatest fear is the same as yours, Harry. While Lupin's substitute was clever, it still falls short of the real thing.”

Mars jabbed his wand at the red leather couch he had conjured earlier in the year and said “Portus.” He headed to the couch, his students trailing along nervously. It sounded to Harry like they were about to come face to face with dementors in a combat situation. Before they could touch the couch, however, the door to the boys' dormitory flew open and Mark Evans ran in, yelling, “Take me with you! I want to learn how to fight them too!” In the next instant, the door to the girls' dormitory also hit the wall and Mary Sue Sladen sped out to stand shoulder to shoulder with Mark.

“How long have the two of you been following the others down here when they meet me?” asked Mars.

Mark looked both guilty and proud of himself as he answered, “Since early November. I told Mary about it, and she started listening on the girls' staircase. We then got Professor Flitwick to show us how to cast a simple sensor charm to tell us when someone was on the stairs at night.”

The older students looked dumbfounded, but Mars looked impressed.

“So just what have you two learned from your espionage?” asked Mars.

“Well, not too much. You don't talk a lot in the Common Room,” answered Mark. “But we do know that you go back to your office.”

“How do you know that?”

“Well, we followed you twice. We tried listening at your office door, but even the extendable ears Mary nicked from Ginny didn't work.”

Ginny crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow at Mary, who turned pink.

“That's because there is an Imperturbable Charm on the door, Mark. I remember

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seeing you two in the halls those nights, but I figured you were on your way to the kitchen to get pies or cakes from the house elves.”

Mary giggled and said, “We've done that a few times too. Once Heather figured out that you tickle the pear for the door to open, it was a breeze.”

“So Heather's involved in your adventures as well, is she? I should have known. The three of you certainly take after your Defense Against the Darks Arts Teacher,” said Mars, patting Harry on the shoulder. Mark and Mary smiled guiltily at Harry. Harry was about to deny any knowledge of their exploits when Mars continued.

“Well, I'm certainly proud of your courage and curiosity, but I'm sorry you can't come with us,” said Mars, rubbing the top of Mark's head in a fatherly way. “These fiends are beyond your abilities as of yet. You're both still too young for this sort of lesson.”

“But Mars,” said Mary, “you told us yourself how much you hated being told that when you were our age!”

“Yes, I did. But darlin', I was trained from a young age to defend myself. You're both muggleborns, you never knew magic even existed until a few months ago. You have to give Harry and I a little more time to teach you before you'll know how to deal with the likes of dementors.”

The two Gryffindor first years looked put out; Mark protested. “But we want to help in the war. We want to help against Voldemort.”

The older students looked surprised that Mark had said Voldemort's name aloud, but Mars gazed at Mark with approval.

“You two *are* helping. More than any first years ever have, except maybe Harry here. The friendships you are forging with the Slytherins are denying our enemy his future army. If all the Hogwarts first years in the past had been as brave as you two and Heather, Tom Riddle would be just a lonely fugitive madman. Now go back to bed, and redouble your efforts on the assignments I've already given you.”

The first years' faces shone with pride. They nodded up at him and headed back to their dormitories.

Mars instructed the remaining students to grab onto the port key on the count of three. They appeared in a drab-looking rectangular room that was lighted by six burning braziers sitting in the corners and midpoints. The room looked spotless, but it felt very dirty, even unclean. A faint stench was in the air, contributing to the overall gloomy atmosphere.

“Where are we?” asked Hermione, with fear in her voice.

“Somewhere you would never want to be caught alive, Hermione. Dementors are filth, and in order to capture them, unfortunately, you have to venture to the places they like to inhabit,” answered Mars.

“We've come here to capture dementors?” asked Neville, terrified.

“No. I've already done that. I need to see which of you could save yourself if a dementor attacked you. Harry, I know you fought off a hundred of them in your third year. There's no need to test you. I brought you along to help me protect the others in case they can't hold the fiends off themselves. Understand?” Mars was deadly serious.

Harry managed a nod. He was still struggling with the idea that Mars had captured a dementor.

“Neville, you first. Follow me,” said Mars, walking to the far end of the room. The complete lack of any cheer in Mars' voice struck Harry forcibly. He knew what they were doing must very serious for Mars to be so grim. Neville gripped his wand tightly as he carefully followed the American.

Harry took out his wand and stepped protectively in front of the others. He could hear their nervous whispers behind him.

“Think of your happiest memory, Neville,” said Mars. “This will be the real thing, and it will be trying to kill you. I won't let him near you, but that won't grant you any

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respite from the fear you'll feel. Concentrate on the happy thought and remember, you are far braver than it.”

Neville looked determined; he raised his wand slightly above his head and acknowledged his readiness.

Mars pointed his wand at the ground near the far wall. Instantly, a horrid towering figure appeared. Its black cloak and hood covered any sign of head or feet; the dementor seemed to simply hover in the air for a second before it glided at Neville.

Harry heard Hermione shriek behind him, but he concentrated on Neville. He could see Neville, Mars, and the dementor clearly in the light of the braziers, but he knew that Neville had no such luxury. Harry was out of range of the enchanted darkness that dementors inflict upon their victims. Neville would be surrounded by an almost impenetrable darkness; only the ghastly rattling breath of the dementor would give him any clue as to where the evil spirit was until it got very close.

When the dementor had closed to within five feet of him, Neville cried, “Expecto Patronum!” and a weak silver beam flew from his wand toward the dementor's torso. The ray slowed the fiend's movement, but it was not stopped, much less repelled.

“Happier thought, Neville! Fight the fear; I believe in you!” Mars shouted.

Neville lifted his wand and the silvery magic faded. The dementor closed in and again Neville cried out the incantation. This time a stronger silver ray struck the dementor, and its forward progress was halted.

“Press your advantage, Neville! Force the creature away!” Mars commanded.

Neville's resolve seemed to strengthen and his beam brightened in color. The dementor floated backwards: two feet, but no further. After a minute, Neville and his charm seemed to be weakening, so Mars stepped in. He twirled his wand in front of himself and shouted “Mactio Phasma!” A foot-wide circle of the brightest white light Harry had ever seen appeared. A split second later, a foot-wide ray of an even brighter

light shot from it and struck the dementor squarely in the chest. The fiend clutched its hood with its ghoulish slimy arms, and seemed to be silently screaming in pain. A circle of bright light formed where the ray hit, boring into the chest of the dementor and spreading out, as if it were dissolving the evil spirit with its goodness. The darkness receded, and within seconds the dementor was completely disintegrated.

Mars and Harry rushed to Neville. Harry put his arm around him for support, while Mars shoved a large piece of Honeydukes chocolate into his hands.

“You did well, Neville,” said Mars. “The dementor would have fled if he had been able to leave this room. However, if there'd been two of them, you would have been in trouble; next time, ignore its attacks, and concentrate on your own.” He patted Neville's shoulder.

“Hermione, you're next,” said Mars, and waved for her to approach him. Hermione looked terrified. Mars puts his long arm around her and pulled her to his side as they walked to the end of the room.

“Hermione,” he said kindly. “Your patronus is excellent; second only to Harry's. Just put the fear out of your mind. The dementor cannot hurt you until it touches you; all of its attacks beforehand are just tricks to weaken you. Concentrate on your objective, and ignore the distractions! You do that all the time while you're studying.”

Hermione nodded as Mars let go of her. She took out her wand and walked over to the place where Neville had stood. While her battle stance was perfect, Harry saw that she was still trembling. He knew it was a very bad sign that she was already so frightened. Dementors had been known to make even the bravest of witches and wizards cower when they attacked.

Mars jabbed his wand at the ground again, and another dementor appeared. Hermione flinched and took a step backward. Harry knew that the darkness had enveloped her. He stepped forward, ready to help at a moments notice.

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Hermione moved her head around quickly, searching for the fiend, but it was still a dozen feet from her. Harry could hear her breathing rapidly.

“Hermione, listen for its foul breathing. That should tell you the direction it's coming from. Ignore the fear, its attacks are all illusions – concentrate on your own spell!” barked Mars.

This advice seemed to steady Hermione; she slowly moved her wand until it was pointing at the approaching dementor. Harry wasn't sure if it was a trick of the light, but to him this dementor looked bigger and more evil than the one Neville had fought. When it had crept within seven feet of her, Hermione gasped and took another step backwards. Harry raised his wand; he was sure she was going to panic.

“Expecto Patronum!” she cried, and a silver ray shot out at the dementor and knocked it backwards. While she hadn't produced a corporeal patronus, her spell looked at least as strong as Neville's second attempt. Harry relaxed slightly. Suddenly, one of the gruesome hands of the dementor flew out of its cloak and struck at the beam. Its protective light faded, and Hermione stumbled.

“Expecto Patronus!” she cried incorrectly.

The dementor closed in on her. She took another step in retreat and stammered “Ex-Expecto Patronum” weakly, and then collapsed onto the floor.

The others behind Harry shrieked in fright. Harry raised his wand to cast the Patronus Charm himself, but Mars had already hit the dementor with his spell: a disc of pure whiteness dug through the dementor, which fell to its knees in obvious suffering. By the time Mars and Harry reached the prone Hermione, the dark spirit was total destroyed.

“Is she okay?” asked Harry. His friends ran up behind him.

“Yes” said Mars, feeling her wrist for a pulse. “She just fainted. It seems she drew a particularly nasty one.”

Ron looked white as a sheet as he knelt beside her and grabbed her other hand.

“Enervate!” said Mars, waving his wand over Hermione. Her head moved. She opened her eyes and saw Harry, Mars, and then Ron. Ron drew her up into his arms and held her.

“Hermione, quickly, have some of this,” said Mars, placing a large piece of chocolate near her mouth. Although she looked bewildered, Hermione was aware enough to open her mouth and start eating. When she swallowed, her color improved dramatically.

“Mars,” said Ron, still cradling Hermione, “are you sure this is a good idea? Maybe we're not ready to face things like dementors.” There was a touch of anger in his voice.

“I agree that some of you are not ready for this, but I fear it's not the last time that Hermione will be confronted by a dementor this school year. I wanted her to get some practice with the patronus charm while I was present, because the next time she fights one, I won't be there for her,” said Mars grimly.

They all stared dully at Mars for a moment.

“Okay, Padma, you're next,” said Mars, pointing at the Ravenclaw prefect.

Harry and the others took their places on the other side of the room. Harry had never seen Mars so bleak.

Hermione's defeat seemed to cast a shadow over the others. Padma, who was easily the second best student in Harry's year, did little better. She didn't faint, but she failed to create a corporeal patronus, and her silver beam only held the dementor at bay for a minute before it dispelled her charm and Mars had to destroy it. She was shaking with fear as Ginny lead her back to the others.

Ernie McMillan fared even worse. He had produced an excellent true patronus in class; however, when faced with a dementor's fear and darkness, he wilted. Ernie fainted without getting any kind of a spell off.

When Ginny approached Mars, Harry held out little hope that she would be able to

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ward off the dementor. He remembered the first time they had been close to one of the former guards of Azkaban. It had entered their compartment on the Hogwarts Express at the beginning of his third year. While the fiend had made everyone feel awful, it had affected Ginny and Harry the most. Professor Lupin had later explained that the two of them had more frightening memories for the dementors to draw upon, and therefore were more adversely affected than the others.

A different notion then crossed Harry's mind. His reaction had been worse than Ginny's that day on the train, yet later that year, he had managed to drive away over a hundred dementors at once. Harry knew Ginny was very brave: she had survived Voldemort's possession without losing her sanity when she was only eleven. Surely, with all the training that he and Mars had given her, Ginny could fight off one dementor.

When Mars had finished giving his last-minute advice, Ginny looked over at Harry. He gave her a confident look and a thumbs up. She nodded back at him and told Mars she was ready. Seconds later a new dementor, full of malice, glided in darkness at the girl of whom Harry suddenly realized he had grown very fond.

Ginny quickly located the direction of its approach and pointed her wand at it. She looked poised, but tense with anticipation. Harry thought that this dementor looked even more vile than the one that had faced Hermione, but he dismissed this suspicion as overprotective worry; instinctively, he took a step closer to her.

When the dementor was within seven feet of her, Ginny visibly reacted. Her head jerked up, but her wand remained steady. She waved the wand and clearly said “Expecto patronum!” A silvery thrush nightingale shot from the end of her wand and flew right into the dementor's hood. The spirit jerked backwards, then spun and tried to flee from Ginny, only to be blasted by the pure light from Mars' wand. Like its fellows before it, it disintegrated in agony within seconds.

Cheers filled the dank room as everyone celebrated Ginny's brilliant performance.

Harry sprinted to her, lifted her small form into the air, and spun her around. Ron quickly did the same. The congratulations of the others followed swiftly. Ginny beamed. After a few moments, Mars spoke over the noise.

“Take heart and heed the victory she has won. It took the combination of magical skill, bravery, and grace under fire to win such a fight. Once you master a dementor, there is nothing in Riddle's arsenal—well, almost nothing—that you cannot face. You're next, Ron.”

Ron's confrontation went much the same as Neville's second attempt. He didn't manage to produce a corporeal patronus, but he kept the dementor safely at bay. Harry was very proud of him.

The pep talk Mars gave Luna was different from that the others had received; in fact, it sounded more like a lecture. He instructed her on how to cast the spell, even though he had gone over that for almost two weeks in class. He made no mention of ignoring the fear before he brought forth the last dark spirit.

When the dementor approached Luna, Harry could see the cause for Mars' concern. She wasn't the least bit afraid of it; in fact, she almost seemed bored. When Luna cast the spell, her somatic gestures were off, but a silvery ray was still produced. It easily forced the dementor backward, but since she did not produce a corporeal patronus, Mars called for her to recast the charm. She released the fiend; again it approached her, and again she sloppily cast the charm. For the second time a powerful silvery beam drove the dementor away from her. It was if she were not only unafraid of the dementor, but not interested in learning the spell properly. Mars shook his head and blasted the dementor into nothingness. Luna smiled at him, clearly enjoying his dismay.

Mars called the group to gather around him. The mood in the room had improved dramatically after the successful defenses by Ginny, Ron and Luna. Mars congratulated all of his students, and said he was proud of each and every one of them. As they headed

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for the port key couch, Harry saw the disappointment in Padma's and Hermione's faces: they were Mars' star students, and neither had done well. He felt bad for them.

After they arrived back in the Gryffindor Common room, Mars called Padma and Hermione over to him. He spoke with the two girls while the others chatted excitedly about their experience. Even though Ernie had fared the worst, he was upbeat about his performance. He said it was the first time he had been confronted by a dementor, and he now knew what he had done wrong. Harry was about to complement Ginny again on her spell work when Mars, Padma and Hermione rejoined them. Whatever Mars had said to the girls must have been good, because they both looked much happier.

“Padma, Ernie, Luna. C'mon, let me send y'all to your common rooms via the fireplace. You can still get a couple hours of sleep,” said Mars, approaching the smoldering ashes.

Neville said good night and headed up the boys' staircase, but Harry held back; he wanted to see how Mars was going to transport the other students. He didn't think that the House Common Room fireplaces could transport people. Apparently Ron, Ginny, and Hermione were also interested, because they remained with him.

Mars pointed his wand at the fireplace and said, “Ravenclaw!” A roaring fire sprang forth from the embers. “No need for floo powder. Go ahead, girls.” Padma and Luna stepped into the fire and were gone. Mars repeated the steps and returned Ernie to the Hufflepuff Common room. The American then smiled at the four Gryffindors.

“Nice trick, Mars,” said Harry.

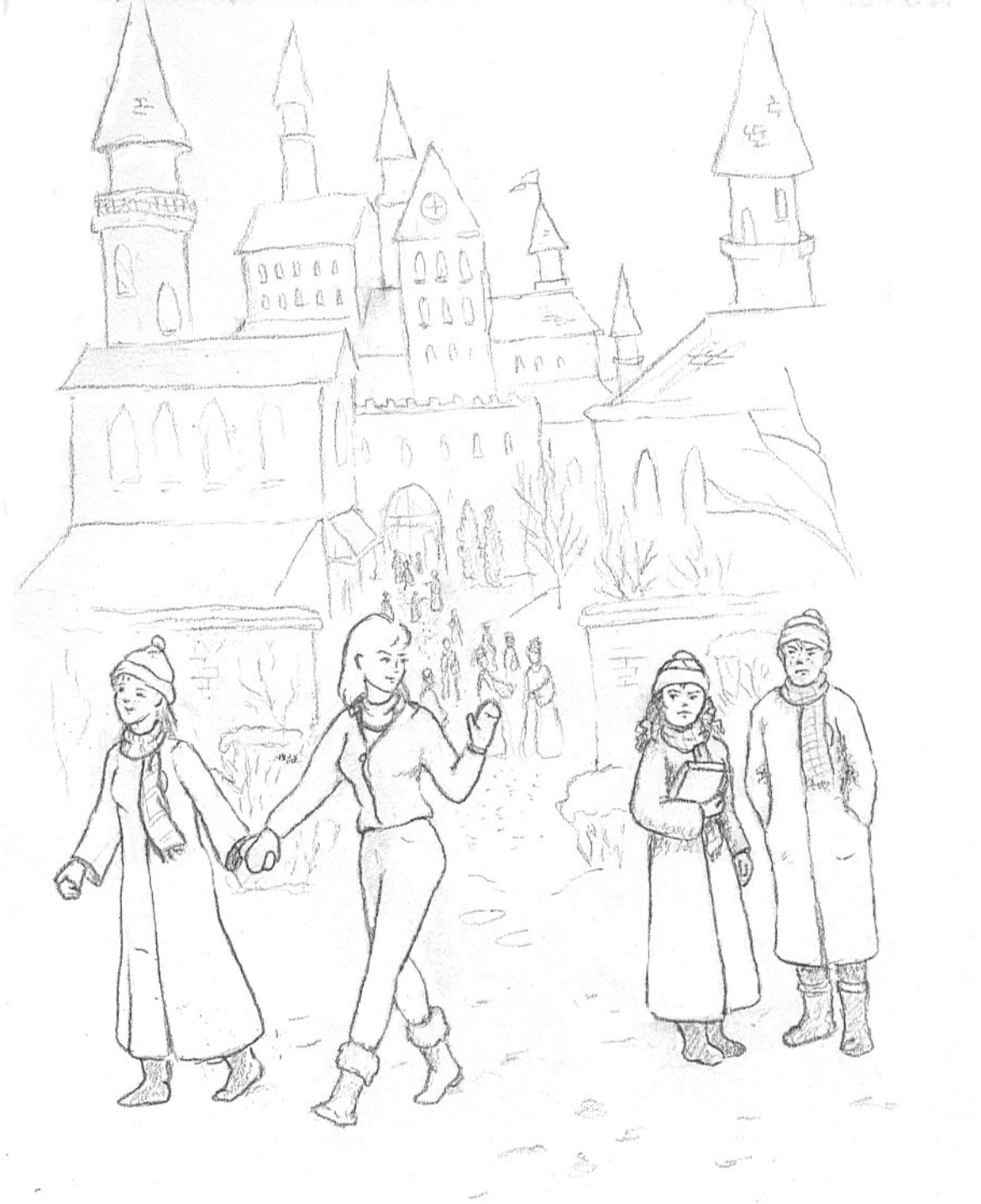
“You really think so?” he asked.

Hermione nodded and said, “Very nice.”

“Well try this one on for size then,” said Mars.

There was a loud crack and Mars was gone. He had disappeared while inside Hogwarts Castle!

Chapter Twenty-Two – The Best Christmas Ever



Friday morning, Harry was at breakfast and the whole of the Great Hall was buzzing with conversations. It was the last day before most of the students would take the

Hogwarts Express back to London to spend the Christmas holidays with their families.

The Gryffindor table was more subdued than the rest. Many of the older Gryffindors were in the advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts class, and Mars had promised they would be tested on the last day of the Fall term. It wasn't a typical test requiring studying, but a test of will. Today Mars was going to require every student to say Voldemort's name out loud to the rest of the class. Harry knew that whispering it or saying it fearfully would not do. It was clearly bothering many of the students around him. He and his friends, however, had no problem saying "Voldemort," and were discussing something entirely different.

"How did he do it? That's what I want to know," said Hermione.

"How much longer are you going to keep saying that?" asked Ron shortly.

"Until I know how he apparated inside of Hogwarts. I also want to know if anyone else can."

"Just ask him," answered Ron.

"Oh that's a brilliant idea, Ron!" said Hermione sarcastically.

"What do you mean?"

"Great wizards don't just blab their secrets to teenagers, you know."

They all got up to leave the Great Hall. Harry said goodbye to Ginny, who ran over to join Luna on their way to Transfiguration. Ron and Hermione barely noticed Ginny's departure; they were still bickering as they headed for the Charms corridor.

"He's shown us lots of dangerous spells, Hermione," Ron argued.

"But they were under controlled conditions with lots of instructions. He only apparated after everyone had left but us. He's never even mentioned apparation in class, remember?" insisted Hermione.

"But why show us he can do it, if he was just going to get mad if we asked about it?" interjected Harry.

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“That's the part I can't figure out,” said Hermione as they sat down in their desks for Double Charms.

While they practiced the Unbreakable Charm and its reverse, the Brittle Charm, on small glass jars, Hermione and Ron continued arguing.

“I think he was trying to send a message,” said Hermione.

“Labefacto!” said Ron as he tapped the jar with his wand. “If he wanted to tell us something, Hermione, he'd just say it,” he responded.

Harry hit the jar with a small hammer, which bounced off harmlessly, leaving the glass object completely intact. Harry shook his head at his friend. Ron frowned.

“Come now, Mr. Weasley, you can do better than that,” said Professor Flitwick, walking by. “Miss Granger, give it a try.”

Hermione nodded, rolled up the sleeves of her robe, tapped the glass with her wand, and said, “Labefacto!”

Harry hit the jar with the hammer again, and it shattered, scattering glass all around the basin in which it stood.

“Ooh, very good. Five points for Gryffindor. Try it again, Mr. Weasley,” said the Professor, heading for the table where Terry Boot and Mandy Brocklehurst were sitting.

“Reparo!” said Ron, and the pieces of glass reformed into a jar.

“Do you think Mars is just showing off, then?” asked Ron.

“It doesn't seem likely, I agree,” conceded Hermione.

“Charlie told me that everything Mars does is deliberate. Every sentence he says is carefully constructed, every action has a specific reason. Maybe it was a message?” suggested Harry.

“But why with us?” asked Ron.

Neither Hermione nor Harry had an answer for him.

Hermione shrugged and tapped the jar with her wand. “Infragilis! Okay, Ron, try it

again.”

“Labefacto!”

Later that day, Harry arrived to teach his Defense Against the Dark Arts class. The students were, as usual, queued up outside the classroom, and greeted him merrily as he let them in. Heather, Mary and Mark all put small Christmas presents on his desk as they passed by it. Teaching the class this term had been one of the most fulfilling things he had ever done. He smiled broadly as he closed the door and walked to the front of the class.

Today Harry continued the lesson on the Disarming Spell. Originally, that spell was not scheduled to be covered until the Summer term, but Mars had decided to have it taught earlier. In fact, the teaching of this charm had started the same day the Advanced class started covering the Patronus Charm. Harry was positive that this was no coincidence, but he didn't dwell on it. He trusted Mars' judgment; and besides, teaching the Disarming Spell was fun.

The class had learned the spell quickly and seemed to enjoy themselves. By the time Harry dismissed them for the term, almost every student could cast it effectively. As the class filtered out, Mark, Mary, and Heather, along with Heather's friends, Gary, Sarah, and Renee, all stopped to say goodbye.

“Harry. Are you going back to Little Whinging for the holidays?” asked Mark.

“I'm afraid not,” answered Harry. “I'm staying with Ron Weasley for Christmas.”

“And Ginny!” hinted Renee mischievously. Heather gave her a friendly shove and the four girls giggled loudly as they exchanged glances. Harry did his best to ignore them.

“That's too bad. I'd like you to be there when I have it out with your cousin Dudley,” said Mark.

“Mark. You know very well that the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery forbids you from using magic outside of Hogwarts,” said Harry sternly.

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“But I owe him. He's always bullied me, even though he's five years older and four times my size!” objected Mark. The other first years nodded.

“It's still not allowed,” said Harry.

“But you did it. More than once,” added Heather.

“And I got expelled for it too. Dumbledore had to petition the Ministry of Magic to get me back into school. Is that what you want, Mark?”

The first year shook his head.

“Just tell Dudley that you go to school with me. And then show him your wand the next time you're alone with him. I promise that'll scare him enough to leave you alone. It won't violate International Confederation of Warlocks' Statute of Secrecy, because my cousin already knows about our world,” explained Harry.

“Brilliant! Thanks, Harry.” His students left the classroom, talking excitedly. Harry packed up his things and headed for lunch behind them.

The last class of the term was with Mars. Many of the students looked nervous about the upcoming test as they took their seats. When the bell rang, Mars immediately started the testing. The Gryffindors seemed to do better than the other two houses. Of the Gryffindors, only Parvati had any trouble, and she still managed to say it, albeit quietly. When she and a few of the others seemed scared, Mars put one of his large hands on their shoulders and told them to try again. Everyone managed to say Voldemort after this bit of help. Harry and Luna were the last two to be tested, and neither needed any assistance from Mars.

The class seemed to take heart from the fact that everyone had managed to pass the test. Some happiness even came to Mars' somber face as he congratulated his pupils. He gave each student a wand-cleaning kit as a present, wished them all a merry Christmas, and dismissed the class early.

As the happy students left to begin their packing, Ron looked at Hermione. “Well?”

"I'll asked him when I get back from holiday," she answered.

"Oh come off it! As uptight as you are? You'll drive yourself mental within a week. Ask him now, and try to actually relax during Christmas," replied Ron.

Hermione scowled at Ron. "I am NOT uptight!" she fumed.

"Let's put that to a vote, shall we?" asked Ron sarcastically.

Harry started to back away. He had no interest in being polled on this subject.

Hermione looked ready to shout a rebuttal, but Mars interrupted, "You three. Quit your squalling and get up here," he said firmly.

Harry's head dropped. He was now going to be told off because of Ron and Hermione's bickering. He glared at them and shook his head as they walked towards Mars.

Ron, Hermione and Harry stood by silently as Mars hugged Luna and Katie goodbye for the holidays. Ginny, standing next to him, also said goodbye to the two girls.

"The two of you are way way too young to sound like that you know," said Mars to Ron and Hermione with a grin.

"Like what?" they asked.

"Like some old couple! Jeesh. I swear you act like you've been married to each other for decades."

A grin spread on Harry's face and Ginny giggled as she bumped into Mars playfully. Ron and Hermione both mouthed wordless replies for a few seconds.

"What were you arguing about, anyway?" asked Mars.

Harry spoke up first. "Hermione wanted to know why you disappeared from our Common Room last night."

"I wanted to get back to my quarters quickly," said a still smiling Mars.

"Mars!" said Ginny sharply. "You know perfectly well what Harry meant."

Mars' smile grew. "And you know that I demand perfectly phrased questions. Try

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again, Harry.”

Instead, it was Hermione that spoke. “Why would you disapparate in front of us like that? It's supposed to be impossible while inside Hogwarts. Wouldn't you want to keep a secret like that to yourself?”

“Impossible? Who told you that?” asked Mars, clearly enjoying himself.

Hermione frowned. She knew Mars was teasing her, but she also knew that she would have to endure it to learn what she wanted.

“It's stated several times in Hogwarts, A History that you can't disapparate inside the grounds of Hogwarts,” said Hermione.

She wrinkled her nose at the smirk that rose to Mars' lips. Mars, like Harry and Ron, held the book Hogwarts, A History in utter contempt. Unlike the boys however, Mars had actually read it, and took delight in pointing out its myriad errors – especially when Hermione was around.

“Tell that to the Chamber of Secrets, which that fine book claims does not exist,” said Mars.

“There are other sources that agree,” Hermione asserted. “Professor Snape and Cornelius Fudge both said that it's not possible to disapparate here.” Harry nodded.

Mars rolled his eyes. “Maybe they should then inform the house elves and Fawkes, to stop them from doing it. I mean if it's impossible, it's probably also illegal.”

Ron and Harry chuckled at Hermione's ire. Hermione put her hands on her hips. “Professor Flitwick also said that wizards couldn't disapparate on the grounds. Are you going to discount his opinion, too?” demanded Hermione.

Mars crossed his arms, but kept his amused look. “Are you sure he said exactly that?”

“Yes, of course. I asked him only this morning and he said that magical wards are in place to prevent you from apparating inside of Hogwarts,” she replied.

“Now, that I believe,” said Mars smugly.

The four students looked puzzled, but within seconds a glimmer of comprehension crossed Hermione's face.

“You're not planning on teaching us how, are you?” she asked hopefully.

“No, no. That would take a very long time. There are still many more important things for you to learn first,” said Mars, beaming at her.

“Charlie told me once that everything you say is for a reason and that every word is chosen specifically to convey a particular message. Were you trying to send us a message?” said Harry. The others nodded at this question.

“Well, Charlie has always given me more credit than I deserve, but I will admit that my words and actions often conspire to subtly, and sometimes obviously, advance my agenda. Many claim this is manipulation, but I like to think that it allows my target audience to make up their own minds,” said Mars.

Ron, Harry and Ginny pondered this answer, but Hermione spoke up. “Well, if your intent isn't manipulation, then I expect you wouldn't mind explaining your reasoning explicitly, if asked. Would you?”

Mars smiled proudly at his best student. “No, I wouldn't, Hermione, but I must insist that if I am to explain this overtly, instead of letting you come to your own conclusions, that you all think this matter through very carefully.” Mars' face then darkened, and his friendly tone turned ominous.

“War is upon us. The battles are still flying under the radar, but gain altitude every day. Soon the full horrors of our foe will be loosed for the public to witness. Tom Riddle's rage, his reputation, and his butchery will scare off many of our allies. The aura of fear that Voldemort projects is probably more dangerous than even his substantial magical power. Capitulation will be on the lips of many, if not most, of the witches and wizards in Britain and Europe. The Ministry, I fear, may even give up in despair without a fight. In

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fact, if the Headmaster and I had not intervened, it would have fallen already.”

Hermione, Ron and Ginny all gasped.

“Even if all of these catastrophes do befall us, there is still hope,” continued Mars. “Despite his terrible powers and dark servants, Riddle stills fears Dumbledore, and you, Harry. Our allies may be weak, but we are strong, and we know where Riddle is most vulnerable. There is lore, and there are powerful, powerful magics, that are at our command and not our foe's. These will be used to great advantage, along with the excellent intelligence we have on the Death Eaters. When fear strikes you, when uncertainty nags at you and when you wonder why you should go on, remember what I just said: doubt is the only enemy that I fear.”

Harry didn't know what to say. He had thought that the Ministry had been working as hard as Hogwarts in preparing for war. Now it seems that Mars considered them practically useless.

“But why show *us*? Shouldn't you be trying to embolden the Ministry, or even better, the aurors?” asked Hermione.

“I'm no champion of lost causes, Hermione; I play to win,” said Mars as he led them to the door. “You should get your packing done before dinner tonight. Have a Merry Christmas.”

They left the classroom a little bewildered by their professor's words, but they heeded his advice. All four packed before dinner and then went down to the Great Hall to eat. Because it was the last day of the term, Mars and Dumbledore were at the teacher's table, and both seemed in good spirits. After dessert, Dumbledore wished the students a Happy Christmas, and bid them farewell and goodnight. The students left the hall and wearily headed for their dormitories.

The next morning Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione marched out with the other students leaving Hogwarts for Christmas. Hermione was gripping Ron's hand very tightly.

“Oh, I wish I were going with you three. My family will be spending most of the holiday with my aunt and uncle in Birmingham. They're terrible bores, but I guess I can catch up on my UAS reading,” sighed Hermione.

“Catch up? You mean you're behind even with all the time you spend studying that rubbish?” said Harry.

Hermione looked at him crossly. “It's not rubbish, Harry, it's the most brilliant magical theories I've ever seen. You really should ask Mars if you can study it with Padma and I.”

“No thanks,” said Harry, waving his hands. Harry glanced at Ron and they exchanged smiles. He looked forward again and stopped abruptly, causing Ginny to walk into his back.

“What's the matter?” she asked.

“Is that who I think it is?” asked Harry, pointing to a tall, pretty blond girl walking toward them against the crowd.

“It looks like Fleur,” replied Ginny.

“It must be her,” said Hermione. “Why else would all those boys be drooling like idiots?” Harry looked around; about half the boys that Fleur passed stopped and ogled her until the students behind them pushed them forward.

When there was a clear path between them Ginny rushed forward. “Fleur!” she squealed.

Fleur bent down and hugged her. “Bonjour, ma petite soeur!”

“Bonjour, Fleur,” said Hermione. Ron and Harry exchanged friendly greetings with her.

“What brings you to Hogwarts?” asked Ginny.

“We 'ave come to bring you, Ron and 'Arry to ze Burrow. Bill is in ze truck outside ze gate,” answered Fleur.

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“We're not riding on the Hogwarts Express?” said Ron in surprise.

“No, Mars will not allow it. He is worried zat ze train is a target. He and Steele will be riding it back to London – in secret, of course,” said Fleur.

Ron and Hermione looked rather put out, but Harry and Ginny were intrigued. Who was this Steele person? Mars must really expect some kind of attack if he was going to be on the train himself.

“Fleur,” said Ginny quietly, taking the taller girl's hand. “We need to give Ron and Hermione a few moments alone to say goodbye.”

“We do?” said Fleur teasingly. “Did she finally come to 'er senses and kiss 'eem zen?”

Hermione flashed a sharp look at Fleur.

“C'mon,” said Ginny, tugging on Fleur's hand and giggling. “Let's go over here for a few minutes.”

Harry followed the two girls, and after a few minutes a somber Ron joined them. They split apart from the students loading into the carriages and headed for the gate to Hogsmeade. Once outside, Harry saw Bill waiting for them on the side of the road with the Hummer.

“What about our trunks? They're on the train, aren't they?” asked Harry as he approached Bill.

“No, they're already loaded in the Hummer. Mars had Winky divert them,” answered Bill.

Everyone greeted Bill and piled into the truck. As soon as Bill had the vehicle airborne and at cruising speed, Ginny spoke.

“Who's this Steele person that is going with Mars on the train?”

Bill and Fleur looked a bit nervous, but Fleur answered.

“She is, a – well, a friend of Mars. From America. She's also a Defender, like

'eem.”

“A friend?” asked Ginny suspiciously.

“Oui,” answered Fleur, not looking at Ginny.

“Mum's the word,” Bill warned them. “Mars doesn't want it getting about that he's bringing more Spirit Defenders into Britain to help with the war.”

Ginny scowled out the window as she leaned back into her seat.

Harry had a wonderful Christmas with the Weasleys, but he wished that Hermione had been able to join them. Although he missed her, his main reason for wanting her at the Burrow was on Ron's account. Each time Ron received a letter from Hermione, he moped about for a few hours in a depressed state. At first Harry and Ginny felt sorry for him, but it got annoying after a week.

“It's not like he won't see her every day in a few weeks,” stated Ginny.

Harry decided nothing must have happened to the Hogwarts Express on its way to London, because there was no mention of it in the Daily Prophet in the following weeks. The only thing Harry had found of interest in the newspaper was the considerable rhetoric coming from Jo Anne Lennon. Apparently, she now had quite a large following, and was arresting witches and wizards on a daily basis. Harry noticed, however, that even in her most belligerent comments, she never renewed her call for the arrest of Mars or Snape.

On Christmas morning, Ron woke Harry early. The boys then dressed quickly and headed downstairs to the living room, where the Weasleys traditionally opened their presents. Mrs. Weasley greeted them with cups of hot chocolate, and bade them wait on the couch until the rest of the family joined them. Ron frowned at the delay and led Harry over to the couch. Within the half hour, the rest of the family was downstairs in the living room. Shortly afterwards, the twins and Bill and Fleur arrived, and then everyone tore into their presents.

Harry had quite a haul this year, but what really made the morning special to him

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was the loving atmosphere. He had spend considerable time at the Burrow over the years, but never at Christmas. The warmth the Weasleys felt for each other, and for Harry himself, made him glow down to his toes. His only sad thought was wondering what Christmas at the Potter's house would have been like had Voldemort not come along.

The only person who didn't seem completely happy was Mrs. Weasley. While her mood was festive, two things were clearly bothering her. Several times, just when she seemed to be finally relaxing, she had muttered something about wishing Percy could be with the family. Bill and Charlie assured her that Percy was doing well and that it was just too dangerous for him to come home. The Committee Against Dark Sorcerers was still keeping an eye on the Burrow; however, they kept their distance so as not to upset the lupine sentinel guardians.

Mrs. Weasley was also bothered by the lavish gifts that Mars had sent everyone. While all of Mars' presents seemed expensive to Harry, a few really stood out: A new broomstick for Ginny (a Cleansweep just like Ron's), a cargo van for the twins – which Harry was positive could fly—and a letter describing an as-yet-undelivered present for Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

“He's secured the employment of a house elf for us?” Mrs. Weasley said in disbelief as her husband read the note to her.

Everyone looked bowled over except for Charlie, Bill and Fleur. Bill stepped forward and explained.

“Her name is Loopy, and she's from Oregon, but a lot of her family is still in England. She wanted to move back to be with her relatives. However, as you can imagine, it's not easy for a freed house elf to get paid employment here. Mars is friends with her American human family, so he hooked her up with you,” said Bill, looking at his parents.

“Bill!” said Mrs. Weasley sharply. “We can't afford to pay for –”

“Relax, Mum. Her salary is prepaid for the next thirty years.”

This further evidence of Mars' extravagance did not relax Mrs. Weasley; if anything, she seemed even more self-conscious the rest of the morning.

Christmas morning passed very quickly with everyone enjoying their new presents. Ron was amazed and delighted by the quaffle with the signatures of the Cannon quidditch team. Harry was surprised to find that it was already three o'clock when Mrs. Weasley called them into the kitchen for Christmas tea. They all squeezed into the small room. Harry, Ron and Ginny sat in front of one of the counters. Bill remained standing next to the door to the living room.

"Bill, why don't you take a –," Mrs. Weasley began, when there was a knock at the front door.

"I'll get it," said Bill brightly, darting out of the room.

Harry was sure that he saw Charlie wink at Fleur. His interest piqued, he joined the others in staring at the living room door. Moments later, Bill re-entered the room, along with Mars and a house elf Harry had never seen before.

After exchanging Christmas greetings with the Weasleys, Mars introduced Loopy to her new family. She curtsied and immediately asked to start working. Mrs. Weasley was still too bemused to answer the elf, so Mr. Weasley gave Loopy permission to scout out the house.

After the elf left, Mrs. Weasley recovered herself and approached Mars, who was standing by Harry and Ron.

"Mars, I know you mean well, but this is simply too much," she said.

"Hold on now, Molly. Before you tell me off, I've got a couple more tricks up my sleeve."

"More? Now, dear, this is getting silly," objected Mrs. Weasley.

Mars, however, was not listening. His wand was already out and moving around in odd patterns. "Obscuro!" he barked.

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The sunlight coming through the windows dimmed, causing gasps of surprise. The room darkened as the sun's illumination faded entirely. The magical candles that lit the Weasley house fired themselves up so everyone could see again. Harry was astonished as he stared out the kitchen windows into absolute pitch blackness.

“Mars?” said Mr. Weasley nervously. “You've blotted out the sun? H-How?”

“Blotted out the sun? You're as bad as Luna. Of course I haven't. I've just hidden the inside of the Burrow from the outside world. Even if a Donnie walked right up to this window,” said Mars, tapping the pane next to Harry, “all he would see would be an empty room. The same is true for all the windows in the house.”

“Mars, dear. We appreciate your concerns about our safety, but I think not having any sunlight in the house is just too depressing,” said Mrs. Weasley.

“Oh, I agree; this is just temporary. I told you that I had two last tricks,” replied Mars as he unpinned one of the talismans on his jacket. He threw it into the air, pointed his wand at it, and said “Revertti!”

The talisman hung in the air and shone with a yellow light. Its brightness increased until it was painful to look at. A second later there was a flash of yellow light and a slight popping noise. Where the glowing talisman had been now stood Percy Weasley.

Shrieks of surprise and greetings filled the kitchen as the rest of the family converged upon the newly arrived member. Mars pulled Harry off to the side. Fleur quietly joined them. Mars explained to Harry that once the Obscuring Charm had been cast, nothing could enter the house. Thus, Percy had had to enter before the spell, and in disguise, because the Committee Against Dark Sorcerers was keeping a very close watch on the Burrow.

It was the first time in over two years that the entire Weasley family had been together. Harry couldn't remember ever seeing Mr. and Mrs. Weasley looking so happy. Mars sat down next to Charlie and stayed for dinner. He had to leave immediately

afterward, however, because, he said, Dumbledore insisted that he also eat with the Hogwarts staff and the students who were at the school for Christmas. Mars stood up from the table, said goodbye to everyone, and disappeared with a loud *crack*.

“How did he do that with the magical ward placed on the house?” asked Ginny.

“Ginny, it was an obscuring ward, not a containment spell. It keeps things out, not in. Besides, even if it was a ward designed to imprison, do you think a wizard like Mars couldn't break out?” answered Percy matter of factly. “I mean, a wizard as brilliant as he can do anything. Do you know how many languages he speaks?”

Ginny shook her head.

“Over 150. And he started Hogwarts when he was only nine!” gushed Percy.

As they left the table after tea, Fred and George walked up to Harry and Ron.

“Same old Percy,” said George, shaking his head. “Well, at least Mars is more likable than Crouch.”

“At least Mars knows Percy's name,” added Fred.

Harry and Ron grinned at the twins.

“He's really starting to rely on me for the war effort you know ...” said Percy as he continued to bore Ginny in the living room.

Three hours after dinner, when Percy had to leave, Mrs. Weasley threw a tearful fuss, but Harry knew how happy spending Christmas with her prodigal son had made her. Percy disappeared, and then Bill dispelled the obscuring ward using the inactivating word that Mars had given him. The joy of the Christmas spirit had temporarily banished all worries from Harry's mind. For the first time Harry could remember, he went to bed to feeling just like any normal happy boy on Christmas day.

Chapter Twenty-Three – A Dish Best Served Cold



The rest of the holiday flew by for Harry, and before he knew it, he, Ginny and Ron were back with Hermione at Hogwarts, eating dinner after the first day of Winter term classes. Ron and Hermione had missed each other so much that they had forgotten to get into an argument for a full twenty-four hours. When Harry pointed this out, neither was amused, though Ginny and Neville were.

Tuesday, Mars awakened Ron and Harry in the middle of the night to begin their training on the Killing Curse. For the first time, Mars told Harry to bring his invisibility cloak with him. Harry woke Ron and grabbed his father's old cloak; they met Mars in the Common Room. Instead of leading them to his office, however, this time he took the boys out the front doors of the castle.

“Where are we going, Mars?” asked Harry.

“To the broomshed,” he answered.

Ron and Harry glanced at each other in confusion and followed Mars across the snowy school grounds. About halfway to the shed, they heard giggling from near Hagrid's cabin.

“What's that about?” asked Ron, gesturing in the direction of the laughing.

“It's Heather and her two friends, Renee and Sarah, sneaking out to ride the hippogriffs,” answered Mars without missing a step.

“What?”

“Isn't that dangerous?”

“They'll be okay. Renee's family keeps a small herd on their farm. She knows all about hippogriffs,” grinned Mars.

When they reached the shed, Harry and Ron fetched their brooms and rejoined Mars outside. They heard more giggling, but it was now coming from above. Harry looked up and saw three hippogriffs fly overhead, each sporting a small rider. Mars smiled at Harry as the girls passed them. “As I said before, your students do seem to take after you.”

Mars led Harry and Ron to the shore of the lake and pointed across it to the mountains. “See that rock outcropping that looks like Snape's hooked nose?” he asked them. “Bill and Charlie transfigured it to look that way in my sixth year.”

“It does look like the great conch, doesn't it, Harry?” asked Ron. Harry nodded with a smile.

“It's a marking that helps you find a secret cave,” Mars continued. “Fly your brooms to the lake shore in front of the outcropping. You should be able to see a crevice that you can enter. Once inside, follow the passage for about a hundred feet until you see a few massive stalactites; turn to your right and say 'Snape is the knobbiest knob in the whole of knobdom.' The entrance to the cave will be revealed and magically lit.”

Ron laughed at the password; Harry looked up at Mars. “I thought you said passwords were a poor defense?” he asked.

“I did, and they are, but we were just kids, Harry. You have to start somewhere. The first bit of magical defense you learn isn't Glyphs, you know?” Mars winked. “I'll

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meet you in the cave.” With a *crack*, he was gone.

“Why are we training in a cave instead of his office?” asked Ron as they flew over the lake on their broomsticks.

“I don't know. Each time I think I've figured out his methods, Mars comes up with something new,” replied Harry, shivering from the cold as they landed on the far shore.

They found the crevice as Mars had described; they entered it, lit their wands, and followed the tunnel until they reached the stalactites. They turned to their right.

“Let me say it, Harry,” begged Ron. Harry nodded, and Ron said enthusiastically, “Snape is the knobbiest knob in the whole of knobdom!”

A circular hole appeared in the wall of the passage; light could be seen coming from the cave beyond it. The boys saw Mars standing inside the cave. The wall reappeared behind them when they entered the room.

“Bill and I found this place in our second year, and started adding defenses to it each term,” Mars told them. “Later on, Charlie found another suitable cave high in the mountains to the south of here, but it could only be reached by broomstick. He preferred that one, but he was also a better flier than us. In the end, we decided to make it a backup,” said Mars.

“A backup what?” asked Ron.

“H.Q. A headquarters.”

“Headquarters? For what?” asked Harry.

“For the war, what else? We didn't know how long the Ministry could hold out, but we knew once it fell Hogwarts was next. We had no intention of going out easily. We studied the school defenses intently, and added to them where we could.

“After Mom was murdered, it was the only thing that kept me at Hogwarts,” added Mars sadly. “I-I arrived at our house just as Riddle finished her off. Did you two know that?”

Harry and Ron nodded silently.

“I attacked him immediately. He was caught off guard, and he was weary from fighting my mother. I wounded him, but I couldn't quite kill him. We fought for almost half an hour, destroying the buildings all around us. He knew he was losing and that the aurors were bound to show up soon, so he fled. He's been running from death ever since.

“I swore right then that I would be ready for him the next time our paths crossed. His power continued to grow, and the Ministry teetered on the edge of collapse. I knew his ultimate target would be his nemesis, Professor Dumbledore. In addition to eliminating the Headmaster, Riddle wants access to the Ancient Library, which is hidden here at Hogwarts. Charlie told me he mentioned it to you, right?”

The boys nodded again.

“Riddle surmised that the lore of that library would make him supremely powerful, but he still feared our Headmaster. As he built his strength for the siege of Hogwarts, Bill, Charlie and I prepared for his coming. In fact, I longed for it. Riddle didn't know how to apparate away from me here like he did at my house,” explained Mars, staring into the white flickering flames which danced upon his sword. “Once he got here, I planned to finish our earlier battle.”

“But how could you be so sure of his plans? You didn't have spies within the Death Eaters back then, did you?” asked Ron.

“Not among the Donnies, no, but we did have a source within the original Order of the Phoenix, and they had spies,” answered Mars with a fond look on his face.

“Sirius!” said Harry at once. Mars nodded at Harry.

He led them deeper into the cave. The air was progressively warmer as they went, but still a bit chilly for Harry's tastes.

All sorts of magical and dangerous looking things were piled inside the cave complex. Books and shelves, odd tables, vials and potions were everywhere. They

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carefully avoided various magic circles and symbols drawn on the floors and walls as they traversed the rooms. Finally, they arrived at the mouth of the largest cave yet. On each wall before the entrance was a painting of a witch. Both paintings greeted Mars warmly and eyed Harry with interest as his group passed into the room.

The giant cavern was lit with magical torches and the floor here, unlike the rest of the complex, was smooth. The furniture in here was in much better repair and seemed to be arranged with care, rather than haphazardly. Several dangerous-looking magic circles were drawn on the floor in the back of the room, and many bookshelves lined the walls.

“I’ve actually cleaned this room up a bit. Haven’t had time for the rest of the complex. It’s here that you shall learn the Killing Curse. I would never defile dear Hogwarts by teaching such an evil spell inside of its walls,” said Mars.

The boys nodded, and they got down to work.

“Murder!” shouted Mars. “Murder is the mindset of this spell. Even if you only use it in self-defense or in a rightful execution, it is still a spell for murder. You must thirst for blood – death must dominate your thoughts in order to cast this curse. You must truly hate the target, and no remorse can be in your heart, or you will fail! Mercy must be sacrificed for necessity when casting this.”

“You mean it will make us evil?” asked Ron, aghast.

“No. However, you will *feel* evil afterward. Unclean and vile. It is then that you’ll be at your weakest to temptation. Many a good wizard has been lost to the lure of Dark Magic after he killed with this spell for the first time. I will be there to help guide you, but there is no guarantee that you will not succumb to it.”

Harry and Ron both shuddered as Mars left to fetch their targets. He brought back three evil-looking scorpions in a glass tank. The scorpions tried repeatedly to sting Mars through the glass. Mars explained that he had originally wanted to use spiders, as he knew how much Ron hated them, but that he didn’t want to needlessly antagonize Aragog.

After four hours of lessons and failed attempts, the boys wearily walked through the caverns and mounted their brooms. Harry thought that Mars could have just as easily brought spiders for them to practice on. Aragog would have never had reason to be upset, because neither he nor Ron had managed to get any part of the spell cast.

“I doubt I could have made an amoeba snuff it tonight,” admitted Harry.

“What's an amoeba?” asked Ron.

“Never mind, it'd take too long to explain,” answered Harry, dejected.

They landed near the shed, put away their brooms, and slipped under the invisibility cloak. Ron was now so tall that Harry had to keep reminding him to stoop over so his feet and ankles weren't showing beneath the hem. When they finally reached their dormitory, the boys collapsed onto their beds. Even though Harry had not managed to cast the spell, the experience had still exhausted him. As he fell into sleep, he worried about the unclean feelings and the lure of Dark Magic that Mars had warned him about. Was learning this spell really worth its consequences?

The cold of January froze the lake and dumped many feet of snow onto Hogwarts. The frigid temperatures, however, did not stop Mars from dragging Harry and Ron out to the cave twice a week. They were making progress on the curse; on the fourth time out, Harry managed to badly wound one of the scorpions. Much to Harry's relief, no vile feelings manifested themselves.

By the the last week of January, Ron had managed to wound the scorpions and Harry could actually kill them half of the time. He had still never suffered the expected side effects, but he was not going to complain about their absence. Meanwhile, in Transfiguration, everyone had finished their Wizard Chess sets, and as Harry had expected, Hermione, Padma and Ron got the highest marks. Harry's other classes were still a lot of work, but going well despite the fact that Ron was now preparing the Gryffindor Quidditch team for its match with Hufflepuff.

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As they walked to double Potions Thursday morning, Harry was deep in thought on their most recent (and boring) Astronomy assignment. He was jerked back to the present at Ron's sudden exclamation.

“Hermione! What are you doing?”

Harry was astonished to see Hermione forcing open the Potions classroom's door open with the Alohomora spell.

“Going to class,” she said, entering the room.

“You just got your prefect badge back! You're still on probation, you know!” Ron sputtered, following her inside anxiously.

“Thank you, Admiral Obvious. Why don't you be useful and watch the hallway instead of nagging me?” answered Hermione as she knelt down behind Snape's desk.

Ron glared at her and shook his head. He walked back to the doorway and peered in either direction down the hallway. Harry joined Hermione at Snape's desk to see what she was up to.

“Do you think these are from Professor Snape's arms?” asked Hermione, holding up three black hairs.

“They could be from his nose,” suggested Harry.

“Don't be gross, Harry. I just want to know if you think the hair on the floor and desk here belongs to Professor Snape,” snapped Hermione as Harry helped her up.

“I would think so,” answered Harry.

“Who else would want to go back there, anyway, Hermione?” Ron rejoined them from the doorway.

Hermione's only answer was a smile as she headed to their favorite tables in the back. Ron sighed.

“You know what that look means, don't you?” Ron asked Harry. Harry nodded. He and Ron had experienced her superior look too many times. She was clearly up to

something, and had no intention of letting them in on it until she was good and ready. The boys walked back and sat down beside her in silence.

A few minutes later, they heard voices approaching in the hall and then Snape entered the classroom alongside Malfoy. Snape glared at Harry when he saw that he and his friends were already inside, but he didn't say anything. Snape went to his desk and waited for the rest of the students to file in.

Today's lesson was the gnome repellent elixir; its ingredients and brewing instructions appeared on the board when Snape pointed his wand at it. He notified the class that they had just over an hour to prepare their potions; then he walked over to his office door and examined it intently for a minute. He returned to his desk, avoiding looking in Harry's direction.

“What was that all about?” Harry asked quietly.

“Probably checking to see if we were in the classroom early to steal potion ingredients again,” suggested Ron.

Harry nodded.

“Just why were we inside early anyway?” muttered Ron; he and Harry turned to look at Hermione.

Hermione paid the question no notice. She was staring intently at Sally-Anne Perkins and Blaise Zabini. Hermione raised her wand to her lips, quietly said “Oratio Clandestinus,” and pointed it at the two Slytherin girls. A moment later Harry saw the hair on the girls' heads move slightly. They both looked back at Hermione in surprise, then smiled at her and nodded. A smug grin of satisfaction appeared upon Hermione's face; she began adding the makings of her elixir into her cauldron. Harry and Ron exchanged confused looks before starting work on their own potions.

When class was dismissed, Hermione got up quickly and sped out of the room. Harry and Ron gathered up their items and walked out after her. When they reached the

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hallway, Hermione was speaking with Sally-Anne and Blaise. The boys approached the girls quietly, listening carefully to their conversation.

“So when did she start only going to the baths alone?” asked Hermione.

“Mid-October I'd say,” answered Blaise.

“Same time she got all weird about getting dressed too,” added Sally-Anne.

“She wasn't the modest type before then, you'd say?” asked Hermione.

“Not at all,” said the Slytherins in unison.

At that moment the Slytherin girls noticed Harry and Ron eavesdropping; they quickly said good-bye to Hermione and headed down the corridor. From the look on Hermione's face, Harry knew she was deep in thought about something.

“Who were you asking them about?” demanded Ron as they headed toward the library for break.

“What? Oh – it doesn't matter. C'mon, let's hurry. I need to look up a few things.” Hermione quickened her pace.

Ron rolled his eyes as he and Harry hurried after her.

Hermione spent all of break finding books on runes to check out. She said a quick goodbye to Harry and Ron and left for her Ancient Runes class. The boys didn't have another class until Double Transfiguration, after lunch, so they continued to study in the library.

Hermione arrived very late for lunch that day, prompting Ginny to ask where she'd been.

“I had a few questions for Professor Stilus, so I stayed late in Ancient Runes,” explained Hermione as she hastily ate her lunch.

Hermione apparently also had questions for Mars, because she stayed late Friday after class, chatting with him. She seemed determined to keep her inquiries a secret, because she said little while Ron, Harry and Ginny were present, and it was obviously

from the impatience on her face that she wished they would leave her to chat with Mars alone.

Over the next two weeks, Harry had little time to worry about what Hermione was up to. The entire Gryffindor Quidditch team was determined to make up for their loss to Slytherin by training often and training hard. Because no one felt worse about losing to a Malfoy-captained team than Harry, he quickly became as fanatical as Ron during their practice sessions. The whole team seemed to feed off of their fierce determination, and the intensity of the sessions easily rivaled that of an actual game – though their beaters still managed to hit the bludgers at their own chasers half of the time.

On the evening of Wednesday, February 12th, Harry was studying in the library with his friends when Ron asked Harry to help him find a book on transfiguration. Ron appeared nervous; Harry looked at his friend in confusion. Ron was quite familiar with the library; why did he want Harry's help? Also, the Transfiguration section was clear across the library from where they were sitting. If Ron needed books from that part of the library, why had he chosen this table? And why in the world were Hermione and Ginny giggling? Harry shot both of them sharp looks, but that only increased the girls' mirth. He got up and followed Ron to the Transfiguration section.

When they arrived in the secluded corner, Harry spoke curtly. “What books were you looking for, then?”

“Don't be thick, I know how to find a book myself. I want your opinion on something,” answered Ron as he dug for an item in his bag.

Harry was about to demand why it had been necessary to leave their table when Ron pulled out two red greeting cards covered in hearts.

“Which one do you think I should give Hermione on Friday?” asked Ron earnestly.

“Oh,” mumbled Harry. “I didn't realize that Valentine's Day was so close.”

“How could you have forgotten?” asked Ron. “The bulletin boards are covered

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with it! The ceremony is Friday morning! Plus, the girls have been hinting about it for two weeks now, Harry. Haven't you noticed?"

Harry shook his head weakly.

"Well, which one do you think I should give her?" asked Ron again.

"Let me think about it," said Harry. He wasn't really looking at the two cards, but instead wondering if he should get Ginny one. He was nervous about getting her the right kind of card; he remembered how irritated she had been at Bill and Fleur's wedding when he didn't ask her to dance. He didn't want to send Ginny the wrong signal, but the problem was he wasn't sure what signal he actually wanted to send. He wondered, how do you send a signal anyway? He felt very confused.

"Harry! Which one do you fancy?" asked Ron impatiently.

Harry apologized and randomly picked the one on the right. He was relieved when Ron agreed. They headed back to join the girls, but Harry's mind did not return to his studies. He could think only of Ginny and Valentine's Day. He ought to get her a card; but they weren't really going out, regardless of what Cho had said—were they? Maybe, he worried, she only wanted to be a friend to him like Hermione? He'd look like such an idiot in that case if he got her a mushy heart-filled card. On the other hand, if she really did fancy him and he ignored her like he had at Bill's wedding, she'd probably never speak to him again! Harry desperately needed advice, but he obviously couldn't ask Ginny, and Hermione was her best friend, so she was out. And then there was Ron. Harry smiled. He'd be better off asking Snape for romance advice than Ron. There was, however, a different professor that might be good to ask.

"Mars," said Harry aloud. The others looked up at him.

"I, er—need to see him. About— er— Friday," he stammered.

"Friday?" said Ginny brightly.

"What are you two doing Friday?" asked Hermione with interest.

Harry turned pink. “It's about the lesson for my class. I—I think I want to, er—change it a bit. Yeah, change it. Need to speak with him,” said Harry as he hurriedly packed his bag and left the library.

He rushed to Mars' office and quickly explained his dilemma to the American. Harry thought he could see both sympathy and understanding in Mars' blue eyes when he had finished.

“I can see the delicate position you're in, Harry, but I think I have the solution for you. Get Ginny a card, a nice one, and some chocolates as well. But also get cards for your other female friends: Hermione, Mary, Heather, Luna and maybe Katie too. That way you look good to her as a sweetheart or just a close friend,” advised Mars. “Go ahead and get Fleur and Molly something, too. It's expensive, but worth it.”

“Brilliant!” said Harry. His parents had left him a small fortune, so the extra cost was not a deterrent to him.

Mars took an Ollie's Owl Order catalog out of his desk and handed it to Harry. He suggested that Harry pay for separate deliveries of the items. While it would cost more, Mars said that the girls would feel more special if their card or present was delivered to them individually by owl post, rather than having Harry hand it to them. Harry agreed, and quickly picked out the cards and Ginny's chocolates. He thanked Mars, and left for the owlery to send his order.

Friday morning, Harry and Ron met Hermione and Ginny in the Common Room before breakfast. In the past, Hogwarts students had generally exchanged Valentine's Day cards in the Great Hall during breakfast, but Hermione and Ron didn't wait. They exchanged cards, small presents, and some very atypical cutesy compliments with each other. To Harry's relief, before things got too mushy, Hermione suggested they head downstairs to eat.

Ginny smiled inquisitively at Harry as they walked through the painting of the Fat

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Lady. Harry wasn't sure if she was wondering why Harry hadn't given her a card while they were in the Common Room, or if she was just happy for Ron and Hermione. Harry smiled to himself as he bounded down the stairs. He couldn't wait to see the look on her face when the delivery owl dropped off her card and chocolates.

Once they arrived in the Great Hall, Hermione insisted that they sit at the front of the Gryffindor table, nearest the staff table. When her friends questioned the change in seating location, Hermione ignored them and placed herself next to the 7th Year Gryffindor girl prefect, Sandra Hill. Ron sat next to Hermione, but when Harry and Ginny started to walk around the table to sit opposite them, Hermione called them back.

“No, sit on this side with us,” she demanded.

“Why?” asked Harry and Ginny.

“You'll have a better view.”

Harry rolled his eyes as he and Ginny sat down beside Ron. Harry had no idea why Hermione was being so insistent that they have a good view of the card-swapping ceremony. It was one of the most boring traditions at Hogwarts. The Head Boy and Girl presented a Valentine's Day card to their head of house, and then each give the Headmaster a basket of sweets. In the 300 years that Hogwarts had been doing this ceremony only one interesting thing had ever happened: an ambitious Head Boy in the 19th century designed a animated magical card, and it went haywire when he gave it to his Professor. The card had fluttered around on the staff table, spilling goblets and throwing food, much to the delight of the student body, until the Headmaster got a clear shot at it and made it vanish. Harry smiled at the thought of Snape being covered in gravy and pumpkin juice.

Harry heard the fluttering wings of hundreds of owls overhead. The birds had flown in through the windows and were now circling the tables as they searched for the recipients of the posts they carried. Harry rubbed his hands together gleefully in

anticipation.

The arrival of the mail signaled the start of the card swapping. The students milled around, handing out their cards and sweets. An owl flying over Harry and his friends dropped a package from near the ceiling. He was worried that the post would be flying very fast when it hit the table, but suddenly a red-and-white parachute opened up from the parcel, and it gently floated down in front of Hermione. This captured the attention of everyone in the Great Hall, and their eyes turned to Hermione.

Hermione ripped open the parcel and Harry instantly recognized the card he had picked out for her. It looked even nicer in person than it had in the catalog. When opened, the card played a cheery tune and flashed greetings of friendship.

“Oh, thank you, Harry!” squealed an excited Hermione. She leaned over behind Ron and hugged Harry.

Two more parachutes drifted down on the Gryffindor table, and soon after Harry received a hug and kiss on the cheek from Katie and Mary. Harry then saw parachutes floating down to the Ravenclaw and Slytherin tables for Luna and Heather. He smiled, a bit nervously; Ginny's had not arrived yet. Harry had at first welcomed all the attention that his ostentatious cards had gathered, but now he realized that it drew even more attention to the fact that Ginny had not received anything from him.

Harry dared a look at Ginny and was startled to see she had many, over a dozen, Valentine's cards already in front of her. Boys from every house seemed to fancy her. He looked up at the few remaining owls in a slight panic.

“C'mon,” he whispered. “What's keeping you?”

Harry then heard a collective “Oh” from the students, and noticed a few pointing to the staff table. Harry saw that Dumbledore and Mars were now standing with their wands out. Each wizard jabbed their wand forward, and hundreds of cards flew from the end of the wands. The cards from Mars' wand were red, and those from Dumbledore's white, and

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one of each landed in front of every student and teacher in the room. They looked quite simple, just flashing “Be my Valentine.” and then the Hogwarts seal, but within seconds of landing, each card bowed to its counterpart and they began to twirl each other round as if dancing.

This amused the staff and students greatly. Harry knew if he hadn't been so worried about Ginny's present, he too would be having a great time. He saw an owl approaching him and looked up hopefully. It did drop something off, but it was just a letter, and it was for Harry, not Ginny.

Harry opened the letter and read it to himself:

Dear Mr. Potter,

I realize that you did not order your cards and chocolates with the special parachute delivery option. This was added at my order at no charge to yourself in order to thank you for all you have done for us.

Regards,

Linda Ollie-Whirlburl

Ollie's Owl Orders, President

Harry thought it was nice of them to include the parachute delivery for free, but he would have preferred Ginny's gifts to have been on time!

“Oh, look,” said Hermione loudly. “The ceremony is starting.”

She was pointing at the Head Boy, Jason Spears, who had stood up from the Hufflepuff table with chocolates and flowers in his arms. Further down the room, Harry could see Ester Spikes rising from the Slytherin table.

“Can't they wait a bit?” said Harry desperately.

“Shh!” replied Hermione.

Harry sighed and reflexively shot a glance at Ginny. She was staring at the dancing cards in front of her, but she did not look entertained. She was not frowning openly, but Harry could tell she was clearly disappointed. Harry saw her fail to suppress a sad sniff and quickly wipe her eyes. His heart sank.

“Where's that stupid owl?” he thought angrily.

“She's almost there!” whispered Hermione excitedly.

Harry looked up and saw Ester approaching Snape with a gift box in her hand. He was about to crossly demand of Hermione why he should care to see two Slytherins exchange pleasantries, when the most unexpected thing he could imagine happened: Ester's clothes, every single stitch of them, moved seven feet to the right, leaving her completely bare in front of the entire school.

For a few frozen seconds, both Ester and the onlookers were too stunned to do or say anything. Ester then screamed and tried hopelessly to cover herself with her hands. A few of the girls at the Slytherin table shrieked and rushed to cover the Head Girl with a robe; they then led her out of the Great Hall, sobbing in embarrassment.

A startled murmur of conversation filled the hall. Many were merrily replaying the look on Ester's face, while others muttered together in quiet outrage. The teacher's table was also ablaze with discussion, as the Professors rose and tried to restore order. The exceptions were Mars and Dumbledore, who were intently staring at each other, and Snape, who was looking right at Hermione.

Hermione avoided Snape's gaze and looked at her friends. “The mark was clearly visible, wasn't it?” she asked.

“Very clear,” answered Ginny.

“Mark? What mark?” asked Harry.

“The Dark Mark that was on her arm. How could you've missed it?” asked

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Hermione.

“Her arm? What about it? Was she missing one or something?” asked a glassy-eyed Ron.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Honestly! You can be so, so—oh, I give up,” snapped Hermione. “Boys!”

“What?” demanded Ron.

As Hermione and Ron bickered, Ginny walked over to where Ester had been when her clothes departed. Several other students were already there, examining the floor. Ginny inspected the area for a few seconds and then returned to the Gryffindor table.

“Self-Effacing runes?” Ginny asked Hermione quietly.

Hermione nodded, but continued to stare at the teacher's table.

“Runes? Are you saying that you had something to do with – ” asked Ron before Hermione interrupted him.

“Hush. Mars is leaving. We need to get to the front doors quickly.”

“Why?” asked the boys, but Ginny and Hermione were already walking toward the doors. Harry and Ron quickly followed after them.

At the front doors Ron rounded on Hermione. “Are you ready to explain to us what's going on now?”

“Yes,” she answered. “I've long suspected Ester was involved in my kidnapping, but I had no way of proving it to the authorities.”

The others started to speak, but Hermione held up her hand so they let her finish.

“Therefore, to get even with her, I had to get her arrested for something else.”

“Get even? You mean that it *was* you that made her clothes jump off back there?” asked Ron, astonished.

Hermione nodded. “I had to expose the Dark Mark on her arm so that others would know she was now a Death Eater, and arrest her.”

“You exposed a lot more than just her arm,” said Harry.

“And in front of the whole school,” chuckled Ginny.

Hermione grinned evilly. “Well, I needed witnesses that would claim they saw the Mark. Even if some of you were looking at other things!” Hermione slapped Ron hard on his shoulder.

Ron cringed in pain and shame for a moment and then asked, “What made you think Ester was involved? I mean other than she hates you.”

“I was first suspicious of her when Harry revealed that she'd been spying on us in the Great Hall. She heard me say that I was going to the Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop, and that's where I was attacked. Harry also told us that he had had the same feelings of being watched on the Hogwarts Express. Do you remember what we were discussing then?” said Hermione.

“Well, we discussed a lot of things, Hermione,” answered Harry. Ron nodded in agreement, while Ginny looked thoughtful.

“But right before Harry started acting all odd the first time, we were talking about Rita Skeeter,” said Hermione, and paused, “and how she might be planning to get even with me.”

A look of comprehension ignited the faces of Ron, Harry and Ginny.

“I can see now why you thought it was Ester, but why would she use Snape?” asked Ginny.

“And how could she use him? Do you think she knows the Imperious Curse and cast it on Skeeter?” added Ron.

“I wouldn't put it past that cow to know Dark Magic,” said Hermione viciously.

Harry did his best not to react. He certainly didn't want Hermione to know that he and Ron were learning two of the Unforgivable Curses from Mars.

“But it needn't had been her that controlled Rita. It could have been her father, or

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any of Dolohov's bunch,” replied Hermione.

“But why?” asked Harry.

“Remember what Mars told us about the factions of Voldemort's followers? All the information that Malfoy's band had received from Snape gave them favored status with their master. That must have really annoyed Dolohov, so he wanted to stop it,” said Hermione.

“But Snape's information was helping them, wasn't it?” asked Harry.

“Most likely it had, but Death Eaters put power above loyalty, Harry. I figure they'd do just about anything to knock Malfoy out of favor,” replied Hermione. “Once they had control of Rita, they used her to frame Snape. Mars told us they never dare to fight each other openly, but this way they could get the Ministry to lock up Snape for them. Voldemort wouldn't know that his own people were behind it.

“I imagine they put the memory charm on her to make it look more convincing. Then they made sure an auror that was in CADS, that creepy Simpson character, was near her the day I was kidnapped.”

“But Rita said it was Snape who cursed her. Are you saying she could fool Dumbledore?” asked Harry.

“No, she didn't lie,” answered Hermione.

“But Mars said Snape was telling the truth too. One of them had to be wrong,” insisted Harry.

“Yes Harry, one had to be wrong, but not actually lying. Rita really thought it was Snape that cursed her, but it wasn't. It was one of Dolohov's followers, using a polyjuice potion to look like Snape. Ester's spying provided them with Rita's motive, and Ester supplied Snape's hair for the potion,” explained Hermione.

“She got the hair from behind Snape's desk!” said Harry.

“The day we caught her snooping around in his classroom?” exclaimed Ron.

Hermione nodded. The others beamed at her.

“I found out that Ester had turned seventeen on October 17th, and it made me think back to when Mars warned Malfoy and his apes about being Death Eaters. Remember?” said Hermione.

“Yeah! He said once they were seventeen, they would be full fledged members,” answered Ron.

“Exactly,” agreed Hermione. “It made me think, with Ester's father being a Death Eater, that she might have joined up when she was of age. She'd want to hide the Mark, of course, so I asked a few Slytherin girls if she had changed her dressing or bathing habits. When Sally-Anne and Blaise said she had become suddenly shy, I was sure she had the Mark.

“I wanted to have as many people as possible see the Mark, so the Valentine's day breakfast seemed perfect. Professors Stilus and Mars gave me tips on which runes would do the trick; of course, they had no idea what I was really going to use them for,” explained Hermione, grinning broadly. “I then made them self-effacing, so they couldn't be traced.”

“But why didn't anyone else set off the runes when they walked over them?” asked Ginny.

“When I created the runes late last night, I made sure to design them not to be active until I spoke the command words, 'The ceremony is starting',” answered Hermione proudly. “But I had to chase Mary off first; she was following me again as I left Gryffindor Tower. Sneaky little snot.”

Ron patted her on the shoulders in congratulations. As his gaze drifted to the doors, he stopped patting Hermione and asked, “But why are we here by the main entrance?”

“Oh, I couldn't let the nasty wench leave without knowing who busted her,” answered Hermione.

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“Leave?”

Before Hermione could answer, a door opened behind them. Harry turned and saw Ester, hands bound behind her back. Mars was walking beside her, holding one of her elbows. Behind them was Snape. Mars beamed at the four students, but Harry could not decide which of the other two looked more upset with them, Ester or Snape.

The three new arrivals stopped at the front doors. Harry could feel the cold emanating from the icy glares between Hermione and Ester.

“Congratulations, Hermione,” Mars said. “It was a bold and risky plan to show Ester's true colors, and it worked beautifully. She's already confessed to framing Severus for the bewitching of Rita Skeeter. I imagine, however, that you've already figured that out?”

Hermione nodded, but didn't stop glaring at Ester.

“I want hear all about it later. Right now I have to turn our little traitor over to an auror that I trust. I am very proud of you, darlin'.”

Hermione looked up at Mars and said, “You've taught me more than anyone. I couldn't have done it without you.”

Snape sighed and stepped forward. “Excuse me for interrupting this nauseating Mutual Admiration Society meeting, but I have something to say before I get ill.” He looked down at Hermione, but the usual disgusted look on his face was missing. “Miss Granger. I want to thank you for clearing my name. Even though the Minister pardoned me, everyone knows he only did it out of fear.” Snape glanced quickly at Mars. “Unlike Potter here, I show appreciation to those who help me. Thank you.”

Snape then turned and walked down the hallway. Harry balled his fists. Snape never missed an opportunity to insult him.

“Same old Snape. Divisive left handed compliments. Just typical,” said Mars, shaking his head. He then looked at Ester. “Any last words as Head Girl?”

“I’ll make sure that Father lets you live, mudblood. I’ll take care you myself once the servants of the Dark Lord free me!” spat Ester.

She seemed about to say something else, but screeched as Mars grabbed her by the hair and tilted her head back.

“Such a potty mouth she’s got,” he said. He opened the front doors and shoved her roughly into a snow bank. “See y’all later.”

Just before Mars closed the doors behind him, an owl flew in nimbly from outside. The bird flew up to the ceiling, circling their group. Harry was about to ask what the owl was doing when a red and white parachute opened up beneath it and slowly drifted down to Ginny.

She watched its descent eagerly, and snatched the package out of the air as soon as it was within reach. Hermione stood next to her and the two admired Harry’s card and the ultra-fancy chocolates that were in the parcel. After sharing a few giggles with Hermione, Ginny approached Harry shyly. She threw her arms around him and kissed him three times. The last one, Harry noticed, was very close to his lips.

Ginny held his hand tightly as they went back to the Great Hall to fetch their bags. Harry floated more than walked along the way. He spent the rest of the day in a happy daze, paying scant attention to his classes.

Chapter Twenty-Four – Point of View



Ginny

Ginny Weasley awoke early Saturday morning to the lovely bird song from her alarm. She blinked a few times, leaned over to her bed table and turned off the alarm. Ginny got up, dressed, and headed for the girl's stairway that led to the Gryffindor Common Room. Ginny liked getting up early on Saturdays, because most students slept in, and this gave her a chance to move about the castle with less bother – specifically, less bother from boys.

Ginny had gathered plenty of attention from the boys at Hogwarts for the last two school years. At first she had welcomed it. Not only was it an ego boost, but it was also part of her plan – the plan to make Harry Potter notice her as something other than his best friend's little sister. It was Hermione who had suggested she hide her overt crush on Harry, and even start seeing other boys. This, Hermione said, would make Harry less nervous around her. Once Harry saw Ginny as another girl at Hogwarts, and not as a fan of his celebrity, she would have a chance to make an impression.

At first Ginny was dead set against the idea. It seemed dishonest. She had had a crush on Harry since she first met him at age ten. He had risked his life to save hers, and killed a basilisk in the process. How could she possibly even pretend to like other boys? Eventually, Hermione had persuaded her to try, but during her fourth year it hadn't seem to be working. While the other boys certainly paid her attention, Harry seemed fixated on that prissy Cho Chang. Ginny had to admit that Cho was pretty enough, but she just couldn't see a girl that cried at the drop of a hat being the heroine for the vanquisher of the Dark Lord. Ginny had struggled to be patient and let Cho wear out her welcome with Harry.

Over the summer, Hermione's plan finally struck paydirt. From the way Harry had hugged her when they first met upon his arrival at the Burrow, she knew his interest was growing. Since then, Ginny had brought him along slowly but mostly surely, and on Valentine's day Harry had come through for her. Now, two weeks later, the card and the empty box of chocolates he had given her still resided on her night stand: the first and last things she looked at each day.

A small noise from the stairwell she was walking down snapped Ginny out of her romantic thoughts. She looked at the stairs, but nothing was there.

“That was a sensor charm,” said Ginny, tapping her foot. “A little faulty, but still pretty good for a nosy first year.” She turned around and walked up the steps, past a door

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that had a sign saying “FIRST YEARS” hanging from it.

A few seconds later, the door opened and a blond head stuck out. The head, as Ginny suspected, belonged to Mary Sue Sladen. The first year girl slipped out into the stairway and started creeping down the steps. Ginny, standing completely unnoticed above, pointed her wand right at Mary's backside and cast a stinging charm.

“Ouch!” squealed Mary. She spun around and saw Ginny pointing her wand at her.

“Your sensor charm's faulty. I heard it go off,” said Ginny smugly.

Mary looked up at Ginny while she rubbed her bottom and said defensively, “Professor Flitwick said it's very good for a first year student.”

“Then you should stick to using it on first years. If I catch you trying to follow me again you'll get a lot worse than a sting on the bum,” Ginny threatened.

Mary looked a bit hurt. She opened her dormitory door and went back inside.

After a short pause, Ginny continued down the stairs to the Common Room. She felt bad for being so harsh with Mary, but it was just too dangerous for a first year to be following her around. Hermione had caught Mary sneaking after her a few times as well. Hopefully the sting, and threats of worse, would curb Mary's spying ambitions for the present.

When she reached the Common Room, Ginny looked around to make sure she was alone. She tapped herself on the head with her wand and said, “Abscondo!” The Disillusionment charm that she had just cast caused her to slowly fade into the background. Ginny looked down at her hands and arms: they perfectly matched the floor that she was standing on. While she wasn't invisible, the spell had made her very difficult to see. She smiled with pride. It had taken a month of late-night training sessions with Mars to master the spell. She carefully opened the painting of the Fat Lady and stealthily headed outside.

“Who's that then?” asked the Fat Lady crossly after Ginny closed her. “Is that you,

Potter? Skulking about in your cloak again, are we?"

Ginny ignored her, and a few minutes later, she was knocking on Mars' office door.

"Still getting up early on Saturdays, are you?" asked Mars as Ginny entered.

Ginny smiled and nodded at him. "Planning to get an early start on today's Hogsmeade visit?"

"No," she answered. "I wanted to ask you some questions."

"About your classwork or your training?" asked Mars.

"Neither, actually; I wanted to ask you a few things about your English family. You don't mind, do you?" said Ginny nervously.

At first Mars had an odd look on his face, but it quickly turned to a grin. He sat down behind his desk and implored Ginny to sit in the chair opposite him. After she seated herself, he answered her. "Ginny, you're a Weasley. You are *part* of my English family. You can ask me anything you like."

Ginny relaxed a bit. She still wasn't sure if she had the nerve to ask him all the things she wanted to know, but at least she now felt confident enough to start with a few questions.

Late that afternoon Ginny walked into the town square of Hogsmeade. She had just concluded a successful shopping stint. Today was March 1st, and the birthday of her favorite teacher, Mars, and of her brother Ron. She had found the perfect gift for both: a broomstick servicing kit for Ron—he had always looked envious of Harry's—and a friendship talisman for Mars.

It seemed all of the village's children were gathered at the center of the square. There, they surrounded a tall, red-robed wizard whom Ginny instantly recognized as Mars. He twirled his wand a bit, and hundreds of colorful butterflies shot out the end. The kids squealed in delight as they chased after the beautiful insects. Once caught, the butterflies turned into sweets. Ginny couldn't tell what the flavors were, but judging from

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the children's reactions, they obviously approved of the taste.

As Ginny slowly approached from behind Mars, she saw him speaking to a witch with long blond hair tied back into a very tight pony tail. The woman was quite tall, well over six feet, and very attractive in a harsh sort of way. Her clothes were similar to those Mars wore underneath his robes: Leather trousers and shirt, with many talismans and charms pinned to her chest. Even from this distance, Ginny could see the striking coldness of her gray eyes. The harshness of those orbs strongly dampened the beauty that surrounded them.

As Ginny drew within hearing distance, she heard the witch's accent, a drawl similar to Mars', but a tad softer. "Angel," the woman was saying kindly, "I know you're having fun, but we have to leave now if we're to meet Henri on time."

"I know, darlin', but these young'uns are just too cute. He won't mind if we're just a little late." One of the young boys started to tug on Mars' hand, begging him to conjure more butterflies. Mars smiled down at him and granted his request. The boy ran happily off after them. Ginny recognized the child as Jimmy Herbert, the young son of Mars' friends that lived in Hogsmeade, the family with whom she, Hermione, Tonks and Mars had lunch with back in November.

"Flora Herbert, how many of those are you going to eat?" asked Mars teasingly of a hazel-eyed girl of about nine who was biting into one of his candy butterflies. Flora smiled up at Mars and revealed three more of the captured insects in her other hand. She looked both guilty and proud.

"Don't let your mama know how many you caught. Judy'll have my blood," said Mars, smiling broadly.

Flora quickly hid the sweets in her robes and then chased after a few other girls that had just run by.

"My dear Angel," said the witch as she leaned up next to him and put her arms

around his neck. "I love you more than anything in the world and seeing you enjoying yourself brings me great pleasure. But don't you think showing such a soft side in public will give your enemies some advantage over you?"

"I'm sure it will, but I refuse to go back to the way I was. I will never again trade my humanity for victory. I plan to have both this time, Sally."

Sally smiled up at him and pulled him close, kissing him tenderly on the cheek. "That's what I love about you, Angel. Confident in the extreme."

"Time to see Henri?" asked Mars.

Sally nodded; they unlocked from their embrace and disappeared with a *Crack*.

Ginny stood in the square, stunned. What was this blond tart doing hanging all over Mars like that? She knew for a fact that he was seeing Tonks.

In a haze Ginny started walking back to Hogwarts, her mind flooded with questions and anger. Tonks had written her at least once a week since November, and she was always going on about Mars. While they both had busy schedules, Tonks and Mars had managed to see each other quite a bit. Tonks had confided to Ginny that she totally fallen for the Texan. Ginny knew Mars had no problem with breaking rules, or even laws if he thought they were wrong, but he had always struck her as a strongly moral wizard. How could he be seeing this blond on the side? Ginny swore in anger.

"What's wrong, Ginny?"

Ginny glanced up and saw Ron, Hermione and Harry looking at her, very concerned. Quickly she came up with an excuse. "Nothing, really. I just remembered some homework that's due Monday." Ginny had always prided herself on being the queen of white lies. The boys nodded, but Hermione looked skeptical.

"Aren't you coming with us to the Three Broomsticks?" asked Harry hopefully.

"Sorry, I can't just now. I have to wrap these presents before the party tonight."

Ginny hated the idea of giving up leisure time with Harry, but at the moment she was not

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feeling the least bit romantic. She bid them farewell and continued her trek and her brooding.

By the time Ginny arrived at Mars' office later that night for the birthday party, she had worked herself up something fierce. She had half a mind to storm into the party and bluntly demand an explanation from Mars in front of everyone. The only thing stopping her was that “everyone” would include Tonks. Ginny sighed loudly as Harry knocked on the office door.

Hermione looked back at her inquisitively, but Ginny just gave her a quick shake of the head. Hermione knew something was up, but Ginny didn't think she would be able to contain her temper for the evening if she started talking about Mars' blond on the side.

“Charlie!” exclaimed Harry and Ron loudly.

Ginny saw her second oldest brother, Charlie, greeting Harry and Ron as they entered the room. She smiled and approached him for a hug.

“You lot keeping your marks up this term?” asked Charlie.

They all nodded at him. Charlie then led them into the lab, which was no longer filled with alchemy equipment. Instead, it had buffets filled with food along one wall, and a large elegant dining table in the middle of the room.

Once inside, the four teenagers were greeted by an array of guests. Among them were Bill, Fleur, Dumbledore, a handsome black wizard named Henri who said he was from Haiti, and Professors Flitwick and Trelawney. Quite a few students were also there, including Luna, Katie, Mary, Heather and her friends, Mark, Ernie McMillan and Hannah Abbot.

Ginny quickly struck up a conversation with Henri. He was dressed in leather with talismans like the blond woman she had seen with Mars in Hogsmeade. She hoped a conversation with him would gain her a bit of information about the blond. She had just learned that his outfit was standard among Spirit Defenders under Mars' command when

she heard a familiar voice call out her name.

Tonks had arrived at the party. After greeting most of the guests, she led Ginny and Hermione away from the others. Tonks excitedly related the Valentines presents she and Mars had exchanged, and talked about some of their dates and a few adventures they had had battling the Death Eaters. She was almost glowing . Hermione seemed to be enjoying the girl talk, and even talked a bit about Ron.

Ginny, on the other hand, was very put out. Every time Tonks lovingly said Mars' name, Ginny had to fight the urge to scream. She found it hard to believe Mars would do such a thing, but Tonks' high praises were driving Ginny mad. Just as she thought she was at the point of losing her head completely Tonks pointed excitedly over her shoulder.

“Oh look, he's arrived!” she said joyfully. Tonks immediately made her way to the door where Mars was standing. Mars smiled and waved at the crowd until Tonks arrived and attached herself to him.

“Adorable, aren't they?” asked Hermione softly.

Ginny didn't think it would be a good idea to answer honestly. She was trying to think of an inoffensive response when she noticed the tall blond woman from Hogsmeade had entered the room and was also standing beside Mars.

“The nerve!” said Ginny, outraged.

Hermione looked at her in confusion and glanced back at the newly-arrived woman. “She must be a defender too. She has almost as many talismans as Mars.”

Ginny said nothing. She was too busy staring at Tonks. When Tonks noticed the new arrival, she released Mars from her grasp and embraced the tall woman as if she were a sister.

Ginny was aghast. Tonks apparently was very fond of this woman, who was seeing her boyfriend behind her back! Somehow, this revelation made Mars' treachery twice as bad; Ginny was now speechless and shaking with rage.

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“Ginny,” said Hermione with concern, putting her hand on Ginny's shoulder.

“What's the matter?”

Ginny could not answer; all she could do was stare hatefully at the blond woman. She wanted to challenge the tramp to a duel.

Tonks let go of the woman; the two chatted for a moment, and then started to approach the two girls. Ginny was still staring daggers at her.

“Steele, these are two of Mars' best students, and my closest friends,” said Tonks, who was now looking at Ginny with worry on her face. “Ahem,” she coughed. “Girls, this is Steele Saunders. She is Mars' cousin from Florida.”

Ginny's malevolent look gave way to one of stunned realization. She continued to stare at Steele. Hermione quickly spoke up to end the uncomfortable silence. She held out her hand and said, in a friendly voice, “I'm Hermione Granger. It's very nice to meet a relative of Mars.”

Steele returned Hermione's greeting and shook her hand. Ginny blinked, broke off her stare, and muttered, “Cousin?”

Steele shifted her cold eyes over to Ginny. “Yes, but I prefer to think of myself as his half-sister. Our fathers are twins, you know. Neither their wives nor their children have ever been able to tell them apart.” Steele smiled, as did Tonks and Hermione.

Relief shot through Ginny's body and she slowly came out of her shock. Steele was no shameless strumpet, but an an adoring family member. Ginny was so happy that her fears were ungrounded that instead of introducing herself properly, as Hermione had, she stepped forward, threw her arms around Steele's mid-section, and hugged her tightly. Surprisingly, Steele did not seem shocked at Ginny's action, though Hermione looked confused. Steele simply smiled and gently patted her on the head.

Once Ginny let go, Steele spoke. “You must be Ginny Weasley.” Ginny nodded.

“Well, knowing Bill and Charlie, and now meeting you, I can see why Angel is so

fond of your family.”

“Angel? I've never heard anyone call Mars that before,” said Hermione.

Steele smiled warmly, but her eyes stayed cold. “You have been to the West, correct?”

“Yes, California,” answered Hermione.

“Wait a minute. I thought *we* were in the West?” interrupted Ginny.

“It's just a regional difference, honey. In our hemisphere, witches and wizards call North America the West, and from Mexico on down is the South,” answered Steele.

“What do you call Europe then?” asked Ginny.

“The Old Countries,” said Hermione.

“That's right, hon,” said Steele. “In the West, Mars is a hero. As the greatest of the Defenders, he's treated like a celebrity. In the South, though, he is much more: he is a guardian and a savior. We call him the Angel of Justice, or just Angel. Even muggle children know him in the South, though only as a myth.”

“Tonks said you were from Florida?” asked Hermione.

“Yes, but I went to school at Escuela Wacah Chan de Conjuro y Canalización in the Yucatan, like all of our family, except Angel of course. Years ago, I adopted their customs,” explained Steele.

“Oh, yes, I read about the Wacah Chan School of Casting and Channeling. It's supposed to be the oldest magical school in the world,” said Hermione.

Mars came up to them just as Dumbledore called from across the room. “Sally,” said Dumbledore, “could I have a bit of your time, please?”

Steele wrinkled her nose. “Of course, Professor, but please call me Steele,” she said grumpily as she walked over to the Headmaster.

Ginny turned to Mars and asked, “Why did Steele look so annoyed? I've heard you call her Sally before.” Ginny noticed that Mars' face looked fatigued: not drastically, but

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she had never seen him look less than vigorous before.

“She thinks Sally is too fluffy and friendly a name for a warrior like herself,” answered Mars, smiling. “I, however, like it a lot. She generally only tolerates family members calling her that.”

Ginny smiled up at Mars as Tonks came over to take his hand. Today was a good day, she thought.

Mars

Bright sunlight bombarded Mars from many directions – he had to blink his eyes many times to adjust to it. The air felt very dry on his skin and he detected the strong smell of automobile exhaust fumes. He was disoriented and uncertain when and where he was.

“The visions have returned.” he said to himself. “Now is a very bad time.”

When his eyes cleared, Mars saw a boy around four years old playing in the sand. As always, Mars knew the boy's name: Benji. Benji Taylor. Behind young Benji was what looked like a highway fence separating the Interstate from the surrounding area. There was a hole in it, possibly caused by a car crash, and Mars guessed Benji must have come through it. Behind him, Mars heard cars and trucks speeding down the road. He turned to see a divided highway of four lanes with commuters on it traveling at high speed. A sign labeled it Interstate 80, and another sign stated that Reno was sixty miles away.

Why was this boy near the Interstate? Where was his mother, Dot? Mars somehow knew his father, Jeffrey, had died in a fire two years ago.

He turned back and saw that Benji was still playing in the sand, but he seemed to be inching nearer the traffic. Beyond the fence Mars saw houses in the distance; two women near them seemed to be looking for something or someone.

“Benji, get away from the road! Your mama is back there searching for you. Benji. Can you hear me, son?” Mars asked anxiously.

If Benji could hear the tall wizard, he chose to ignore the questions. The boy continued to plow sand out of his way with his hands as he neared the roadside.

“Benji! Hear me now. Sometimes you people can hear me, please let this be one of those times. Benji, look up at me. This is Mars talking, stop!” he pleaded with the boy.

Benji pushed the sand up to the shoulder of the road and stopped. Cars whizzed by at eighty miles per hour, just eight feet from the youngster.

“Why don't any of you idiots stop?” Mars yelled at the drivers. “Is it normal for a four year old muggle to play so near a highway?”

The drivers paid the wizard no more attention than the boy.

Benji had quit his advance to the road, and even backed up a few feet onto the sand. He looked back over the fence in the direction where his mother was searching for him.

“Yes son. Go that way. Your mama's callin'. Please,” said Mars desperately.

Across the four lanes of traffic movement caught Mars's eye. It was one of the large jack-rabbits of the Western USA, hopping around slowly in search of the sparse vegetation in the area.

“Oh, don't let him see –” whispered Mars.

“Bunny!” shouted Benji.

The four year old started across the Interstate as fast as his little feet could take him in the direction of the jack-rabbit.

“NO, NO!” screamed Mars, horrified and helpless.

Brakes squealed, horns honked, and people screamed out open windows, but Benji made it to the median. Several people on that side of the Interstate braked to a stop and sprinted for the boy as he climbed under the railing that divided the highway. A few of his

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would-be rescuers were within twenty feet of Benji when he stepped out onto the road and right in front of a speeding station wagon.

Mars collapsed to his knees in agony. His hands covered his tear-filled face. How many innocents had he seen die in his visions? He had lost count years ago, when he was still very young.

As he knew they would, visions of Benji's lost future now began to haunt Mars. Home runs that would never be hit in Little League, a dance at the prom that would never be taken, a scholarship to UNLV now given to someone else, and three brown-eyed daughters that would never be born.

After a moment Mars composed himself, but remained on his knees. Then he said, clearly and slowly, "Benji Taylor, you did not die alone. I was with you. I shall always remember you and the future of which you were robbed."

Mars felt the hot sand under his knees turn to cool and soft carpeting. From the smell, he knew he was in an air conditioned building. He raised his head and looked around the room. This vision was not quite in focus. He could see posters on the walls of the room: the closest one was labeled Ricky Martin; another was perhaps a map of Mexico, but the rest were too blurry to make out. To his right, Mars saw a bed, with a light red spread hanging down over its side. He stood up and saw that on top of the bed were a few hand sewn dolls, some large fluffy pillows, and a Latino girl in her mid-teens crying quietly.

"Your name is Maritza," said Mars as he gazed at the girl. She had dark, medium-length hair and large eyes magnified slightly by the glasses she wore. Her eyes would have been very pretty if they hadn't been so red and puffy from crying. Mars looked around her room.

"Nothing looks too dangerous. Why I am seeing you, my dear?" he said to himself.

Maritza let out a sob and flung a piece of paper onto her bed near where Mars

stood. It was slightly crumpled, but he could still read the writing in Spanish:

Maritza,

I will no longer be seeing you. Maria just told me that she liked me and you know I've always wanted to date her. She's just prettier and more popular than you. I mean, who can blame me right?

Just try to remember the good times we had and try to get over me – I know it will be hard, but it's not like you have a choice.

Jorge

“What a jerk. You should be glad to be rid of him, Maritza,” said Mars after he finished reading the note.

Maritza reached across her bed and picked up a picture frame from a night table. She brought it back to her chest and stared at it. Mars' gaze remained on the table. Behind the frame were a large glass of water and a pill bottle. The bottle was clearly marked: Extra Strength Sleeping Pills.

“Oh, I can't lose another one today. Maritza! Please try to hear me! My name is Angel, hear my voice!” said Mars in desperation.

Maritza's only reaction to his' pleadings was to throw the picture frame across the room as hard as she could. It hit the wall and then the floor, shattering and making quite a bit of noise.

“C'mon parents, if you're home you must've heard that!” said Mars hopefully. Nothing stirred outside the room; Mars returned his gaze to the girl.

Maritza now had the glass and the pill bottle in her hands. Her face looked f hopeless as she dumped a few of the sleeping pills into her mouth. The focus of the room was improving, Mars knew this future possibility was rapidly becoming more likely.

“MARITZA! I am the Angel of Justice, hear my pleas! Even muggle children know me here in the South. Do not throw your life away on this boy! You will meet many

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others.

“Your future is bright. You'll be an artist, your work will bring joy to people across the world. No boy is worth losing all that. Stop this now!” he demanded.

“Angel?” said Maritza, with her mouth full of pills.

“Yes!” said Mars in great relief. “Though you cannot see me, I am here.”

“I th- th-” stuttered Maritza, and then she spit the pills out of her mouth. “I thought you were just a legend.”

“To most I am, but for you, today, I am real.”

“You – you came to save me?” asked the astonished girl.

“Yes,” he answered.

Maritza's face glowed. She visibly relaxed and looked up at the ceiling as though she could see Mars floating above her.

“An artist.” she said happily.

“And by you hearing me, dear Maritza, I too have been saved,” thought Mars.

The room started to fade, Mars knew he was losing the vision.

“Remember me,” he said softly before everything went black.

Seconds later the world around Mars was still black. He realized that wherever he was, it must be dark. He could tell he was no longer in a vision, but things still did not seem quite real. Mars was often disoriented after strong visions, so he didn't panic, but he knew he had to remember quickly what he had been doing before their onset. Right now all he could remember was that it had been very important. He looked at his glowing wizard watch; it read 2:00AM, Saturday, March 22nd, 1997 but that stirred no memories for him.

Mars walked forward and even though he was not trying to be quiet, his feet made absolutely no sound. He had been walking for about ten seconds when he saw light coming around a corner, but it looked strange, almost ghostly. Now he could see the walls

of buildings on either side; they also looked odd. They were almost translucent, and seemed to shimmer like a reflection in rippling water.

Everything in the alleyway was the same. The dumpster, the light pole, and even the stray cat wandering around seemed out of phase.

“Ethereal,” he thought. “I must be in the realm of spirits; undetectable by those around me until I reemerge into the physical world.”

He stopped and racked his brain for a minute. “Who am I waiting for? And did I plan to kill them? Whoever it is, they must be very dangerous for me to have taken such a precaution.”

All of his questions were answered when he heard a voice from further down the alley. It was a female voice, shrill and evil sounding.

“Lestrage,” whispered Mars murderously.

As he drew his wand and walked toward the voice, the disorientation from the visions faded completely. His best agent had sent him word that the three Lestrages – Bellatrix, her husband Rodolphus and his brother Rabanstan – were meeting with several members of CADS in this secluded location tonight.

Mars had been hunting the Lestrages since mid-Summer, but they, like Peter Pettigrew and Voldemort himself, had managed to elude him. Because of this, he had taken no chances with this incredible piece of information – only Dumbledore knew what Mars was doing. The old man had wanted to help, but Mars had insisted that the Headmaster stay with Harry. Mars did not trust Snape or Professor Sinistra one single bit.

Mars arrived at the building where the meeting was to take place. He could hear them speaking, but his state prevented him from understanding the words. His intangible form, however, did allow him to simply walk through the wall and into the room with them.

Two CADS members, Jon Simpson and a wizard Mars did not know, were

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nervously eying the three Lestranges. Rodolphus, who was large and looked relaxed, was nearest Mars. Bellatrix, haughty as always, was next to her husband, and a bit further away was Rabastan. Bellatrix seemed to be lecturing the CADS people.

“Five on one?” thought Mars. “Four of them are top notch wizards, and the fifth a total unknown. Can't really afford to fight fair, especially if I have to leave the CADS people alive.”

Sparks danced in his eyes and he seemed to grow taller. Electric pulses started swimming around his body as Mars prepared for battle. His wand transfigured into a sword, and soon after white flames began dancing along its blade.

He strode purposefully at the nearest Lestrangle, drew his long knife into his left hand, and reentered the physical world just before his backslash decapitated the unsuspecting Rodolphus. Before anyone could react – in fact, before Rodolphus had even hit the floor – Mars took another step forward and hit Bellatrix in the face with a full roundhouse kick. She wilted to the ground, knocked unconscious before she could even grunt in pain.

The two CADS wizards stood frozen in shock, but Rabastan recovered quickly. He deftly pointed his wand at the scintillating form of Mars and made a slashing motion. A streak of purple flame jumped from the wand and flew at Mars' torso. Another lightning-quick backslash from Mars' fiery sword deflected the curse harmlessly to the side, and then in perfect motion Mars followed up the block by jabbing Rabastan in the chest with his offhand weapon.

Lestrangle flinched violently from the pain of the mortal wound and dropped his wand. Mars stared down at the Death Eater, his hand still gripping the long knife. He had no time for last words; there were still two wizards behind him. Mars shoved the blade in fiercely, forcing the dying wizard back onto a work table.

Mars spun around quickly, just as the two CADS wizards recovered themselves

and cried “Stupefy!” Red stunners streaked at him.

Mars managed to block the unknown wizard's spell with his sword, but Simpson's hit him dead in the chest. However, Mars was not knocked backwards or even stunned. The only damage the charm seemed to have done was to char one of the talismans on Mars' shirt. Mars smiled at the wizards.

“Expelliarmus!” said Mars forcefully. The two wizards were violently knocked back almost ten feet; their wands flew into the air and landed on the sill of a window near the ceiling above Mars' head.

Mars turned and walked over to Rabastan. He grabbed the wizard by his robes and lifted him into the air.

“Where's he hiding?” demanded Mars, staring into the dying man's eyes.

“I-I do not,” wheezed Rabastan before he broke into a coughing fit. “I do not know where the Dark Lord resides.”

“You speak truthfully,” said Mars. “Did he put a memory charm on you?”

Lestrangle remained silent.

“You are too weak for me to remove the block, but it is no matter. There's another to get my answer from. I do, however, have a different question for you, Rabastan. Does he fear me? Does your master cower from my name? Or would he fight me if given a chance?” asked Mars as he stared deeply into the eyes of his captive.

Lestrangle shook his head weakly. “N-no fear. He dismisses you as a common mercenary. He fears only Dum-Dumbledore.”

Mars' face lit up, and a broad, eerie smile formed on his lips.

“You lie. But thank you anyway, Rabastan. You have been very, very helpful.”

Mars pulled the knife out of Lestrangle's chest and dropped him onto the floor. He walked over to Simpson, who was helping the other wizard to his feet.

“Did you get to hear their full offer for your betrayal of Dolohov before I dropped

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in?” asked Mars.

“How did you know?” mumbled the unknown wizard.

Simpson said nothing; he merely glared back at Mars.

“I know a lot of things, Simpson. More than you and your sweetheart Jo Anne could begin to suspect,” stated Mars.

Simpson snarled.

“However, I am not here to brag, but to warn. Dumbledore is giving you and Lennon one more chance to clean up your act. Throw the Death Eaters out of your group and join with us openly in the war against Voldemort. Your attempts to take over the Ministry will no longer be tolerated,” said Mars.

He pointed his wand behind him and said “Accio wands!” The wands flew from the window above and landed in his left hand. He threw them to their owners. Both wizards disappeared immediately.

“Lily?” said Mars.

The small downy woodpecker flew over to his arm from seemingly out of nowhere.

“Fetch Buckbeak from the roof of that canning factory, would you, please? We don't want to leave our new guest, Bella here, laying on the floor any longer than needed.”

Hermione

“Where's Ron?” demanded Hermione.

Ginny shrugged.

“If he doesn't get here soon we'll be late for the prefect meeting,” said Hermione as

she looked down the nearby halls.

“He knows where the meeting is, Hermione; we can just meet him there,” suggested Ginny.

Hermione reluctantly agreed and the two girls headed down the corridor. As they approached the Entrance Hall, they spotted Ron speaking with a girl. His back was against the wall, and his body language suggested he wanted out of the conversation at the earliest opportunity.

“What does she think she's playing at?” asked Hermione harshly.

“Oh Hermione, Luna's harmless,” said Ginny, smiling.

“I'm not as clueless as Ron, Ginny. I know what she's up to.”

“She knows better. You'd hex her into next week. C'mon, let's rescue him,” said Ginny, nodding her head at Ron and Luna.

“Oh, I'd hex her all right, but since when has Luna let reality stop her?” muttered Hermione.

Already irritable, the incident made Hermione almost unapproachable for the rest of the day. Ron's ignorance of the cause of her bad temper only made matters worse. Luckily, Ginny pulled him aside and suggested he just let Hermione simmer for a while.

After the prefect meeting, Hermione left her friends to meet Padma in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. She was about half way there when she felt a breeze from behind her and heard Professor Snape whisper, “Granger, meet me in the usual place. This is urgent.”

Hermione sighed. She was in no mood to deal with Snape this evening. Despite the warning that Snape had received from Dumbledore, he continued in absolute secret to try and convince Hermione that Mars was manipulating them. Hermione dismissed most of what Snape said as a product of his jealousy and hate, but every now and then something he said made sense. Snape made just enough sense to keep Hermione listening to him,

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and for her to eye Mars with slight suspicion.

Hermione changed directions and hurried to the statue of the Hufflepuff badger. When she reached it, she scratched the badger behind its left ear and said, “Show me the way.”

A small secret door opened behind the statue. Hermione entered and closed the door behind her. She followed the tunnel down and then to the left for about forty feet, until she reached a dust-covered room that had odd bits of junk strewn about it.

“Well, show yourself, will you?” said Hermione crossly.

A trophy laying on the floor began to wobble and then it grew in size. Soon it was as big as a man, and then it transfigured into Snape.

“You should have been more careful when you opened the secret door. That first year, Mary Sue Sladen, likes to follow you around. She could have seen you enter the passageway. She's totally under the control of Mars, and would have ratted us out immediately,” hissed Snape.

“I'm allowed to meet with my Professors,” insisted Hermione. “I have nothing to fear from Mars finding out about our discussions.”

“Nothing to fear?” spat Snape. “Just the loss of your free will? If no one stops him soon, we will defeat the Dark Lord just to anoint an even more powerful wizard as our overlord.”

Hermione fought the urge to roll her eyes. “I thought you said it was urgent that I meet you? I don't consider hearing the same conspiracy theories for the eighth time urgent.”

Snape curled his lip in disgust. “Sometimes, I don't know why I bother trying to help you, Granger. I'm often tempted to cast you off, but I've invested too much in you.”

“I'm flattered. Could you please get to the point?” snapped Hermione.

“The point is that your beloved Texan has won his battle of wills with Professor

Dumbledore. He has been allowed to take over the Ministry,” replied Snape.

“You didn't mind it when they pardoned you. Besides, Professor Dumbledore himself told us ages ago that he and Mars were propping up the Ministry.”

“I said taken over, not have influence over, you fool! Nothing happens at the Ministry without Mars' knowledge or blessing. I'm not sure how he's managed it, probably a combination of bribery and threats, but how he did it isn't important anymore. What is important is that we stop his next phase,” said Snape.

“And what phase would that be?” asked Hermione with a hint of sarcasm.

“He's preparing a coup, to put himself or a puppet in charge. To do this, he'll need some help from powerful and ruthless wizards who are very loyal to him.”

“Are you referring to the Spirit Defenders?” she asked.

“Yes, the bounty hunters of the West. He's already sneaking them into the country as we speak,” answered Snape.

“Sneaking? Two of them were at Hogwarts a month ago,” said Hermione.

“Oh, there are a few who are cultured enough to show in public, but you haven't met a rank-and-file Demon Fighter yet,” offered Snape.

“I'm sorry, Professor, but these theories sound just like the old conspiracies you've been warning me of for months. What was the urgent thing that you had to tell me?”

Snape glared down at Hermione for a few seconds before he spoke. “Not only has Mars taken control of the Ministry, he has also been given free reign by Dumbledore. When the Headmaster first broached the subject of inviting Mars back to Britain, he assured us that Mars would be kept on a short leash and would help us with the battles only. This promise of a short leash, along with a wizard whose power would tip the scales in our favor, persuaded many of the Order to give the idea a chance.

“As I knew would happen, Mars reneged on the arrangement as soon as he arrived. What I didn't know, and neither did Dumbledore, was that Mars had grown in power

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several times over. He tore Potter away from the sanctuary that had protected him for fifteen years, he re-enchanted the Weasley family, formed his own military group – stealing many of our members and our secrets – and then he made his own deals with the Ministry. The wealth of information that Dumbledore said would come from Mars' aberrant powers was kept to himself and his henchmen. Mars has positioned himself to rule Britain. Killing off the Dark Lord is not his ultimate goal; it is but a step in his plan.”

“How many times have we been through this? Harry's protection was failing at his aunt's house, Dumbledore admitted this. Mars formed his own group because your lot blackballed him! And you're the last wizard in England who should complain about intelligence sharing–” replied Hermione fiercely. She stopped short. She had been very close to naming Snape as Voldemort's unknowing spy.

Snape was staring right into her eyes; in fact, during their entire conversation, his gaze had not shifted once. Hermione quickly averted her eyes.

“Still valiantly keeping the secrets of your master, are you, loyal apprentice?” asked Snape sarcastically.

Hermione was furious and balled up her fists. Snape had brought her down here just to see what information on Mars he could gather by using Legilimens on her! Why hadn't Mars taught her Occlumency like he had Harry? She had tried learning it from a book, but as she had been warned, it just didn't work very well that way.

“I won't be an unwitting spy!” she spat venomously. The irony gave her some pleasure.

“A willing one would be much more valuable,” suggested Snape.

“Even if I trusted you, which I don't, how long do you think it would take Mars to see through my act? A day, maybe two? I'd have to avoid him, and that would be VERY suspicious. You haven't given me any reason not to trust him. No one but Harry or Dumbledore has done more to stop Voldemort than Mars,” said Hermione, still shading

her eyes.

“And yet you still come to speak to me when I call,” replied Snape.

“I guess I felt there must be something good about you. Some reason Dumbledore trusted you, but now I know I was wrong. You're just a hateful and jealous old man,” she said as she turned to leave.

“STOP!” shouted Snape.

Hermione did, but she did not turn to face him.

“I will not have some naive muggleborn brat tell me off for what I have done to survive. Just pictures of the things that I've faced would make you die of fright, girl!” he hissed.

Hermione was enraged. How dare he taunt her after she called him on his ruse? Two could play that kind of game. She turned, but kept her eyes averted. “Fright's not what killed Mars' mum, tho, is it?”

“What do you mean?” asked Snape icily.

“I mean, Mars seems to blame you for his mum's death. I always thought that it was just because you were a Death Eater when it happened, but he never mentions her when he talks about the other Death Eaters. Why is that? Did you have any role in her assassination?” asked Hermione.

“This conversation is over, Miss Granger,” said Snape stiffly. He stomped by her and down the secret passageway.

At first she was happy to have sent him off in a huff. He had tried to take advantage of her willingness to listen in order to gather information from her. He deserved her scorn.

Then Hermione remembered that she had sworn to try everything in her power to make all the enemies of Voldemort work together. She knew they were lost without unity. No matter how powerful Mars or his friends – well, more fans than friends – thought he

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was, he couldn't defeat Voldemort and all his allies alone. The Alliance, the Order, and the Ministry all had to work together, or they would lose everything. Egos and old vendettas had to be checked at the door.

“They're the most powerful wizards on the planet! Why can't they see that?” said Hermione aloud.

“Powerful wizards see what they want, and then try to change the world to reflect what they see,” said Hermione's inner voice.

“I'll make them see the truth if I have to tattoo it on their faces!” she swore as she headed for the secret door.

She headed for the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. She and Padma had planned to study from eight till eleven that night, but Hermione was already twenty minutes late.

“Hi, Padma. Sorry I'm late,” said Hermione as she sat down next to the Ravenclaw prefect.

“It's no bother to me, Hermione, but you do seem bothered by something,” replied Padma.

“It's just, well, it's, um ...” stammered Hermione as her guts twisted inside. She wanted to confide in Padma, but Snape had made her swear not to tell anyone that they were meeting. But Snape was such a jerk, she thought. He deserves it!

“Professor Snape was just having a go at Mars. That always upsets me,” confessed Hermione.

“It would upset me too. I have to say that I'm surprised Snape's brave enough to do something like that,” said Padma.

“He only does it when it's just the two of us,” said Hermione.

Padma sighed. “Just like the git, isn't it? I just couldn't stand to hear anyone run down Mars, especially now, when he looks so tired. Have you noticed?”

“Yes, I have, actually. I guess those late-night training sessions are catching up to him,” answered Hermione.

Padma nodded, and the two girls went back to their studying until well after midnight.

Ron

Ronald Weasley, keeper and captain, set himself up in front of the center ring. The opposing seeker, in her yellow robes, was tossing the quaffle into the air and catching it over and over. They stared fiercely at each other, each daring the other to blink. Finally, the referee flew up on her broom to signal the start of the penalty shot. Everything was riding on it. If Ron blocked it, they would win the Cup; if he didn't, they would lose, and spend a year wondering what could have been.

The referee blew her whistle and the chaser began her approach. Penalty shots were very difficult to defend. In fact, over 85% of them resulted in goals. Ron knew this, of course, but he didn't let it get his spirits down. The chaser leaned to the right, but Ron knew it was a fake – he had been watching this chaser's tactics closely. Ron pretended to fall for her fake, hoping to make her commit to going left. The chaser bit on his bluff and turned sharply left as if she were planning to shoot for the outside goal.

By making the chaser commit quickly to one side, he had doubled his chances of a successful defense. The chaser suddenly stopped and threw the quaffle back to the right, toward the center ring. Ron could not have contested a shot aimed for the right ring, but it would have been a very long throw for her.

Ron slowed his broom as fast as he could and loosened his grip. He slid backwards down the stick until only his left hand was still on the broom. His feet flashed out as

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quickly as they could and he tried desperately to make any kind of contact with the quaffle. Ron's right foot somehow managed to nick the quaffle on the side sending it wide of the center ring. To Ron's horror however, the quaffle was now sailing toward the dead center of the right ring. The crowd and players from both teams inhaled nervously as the quaffle approached and then fell short of the goal.

Cheers erupted all around him. He had done it, he had defended the penalty shot! They had won the match and the Cup!

His teammates flew over to congratulate him, but Ron was only interested in celebrating with one person: a bushy haired, brown eyed girl who was waiting for him on the ground. Ron spotted her on his team's sideline and immediately sped over and landed beside her.

“Hermione we did it! We won the Premiership, and in my first year as a pro!” he yelled as he approached her.

She looked very proud of him and opened her arms wide for a hug.

After Ron took two more steps her expression changed. Hermione's face now looked as if there was a forced frown upon it, a bit like a bad actor trying to look mad. A moment later her face again changed – she now looked bored. Her arms went from widespread friendly to crossed and hostile. She turned away from Ron and started pacing.

Ron look at her confused. “What's wrong?” he asked.

“Oh nothing,” she answered curtly as she continued to pace.

In Ron's opinion, there could not have been a worse answer to his question. Even if she had answered, “Yes, there is a problem,” he would have at least been likely to hear what it was immediately. “Oh nothing,” meant, “Of course there's a problem and you have to guess it Ronald Weasley. Quickly if you know what's good for you.”

Ron sighed to himself. “Aren't you happy we won?” he asked nervously.

“What? At Quidditch? You know I've always told you to quit playing that,” she said.

He felt as though he had been stabbed.

“When did you say that?” Ron demanded.

“I've always wanted to marry a healer, you know. I think you need to seriously reconsider your priorities before the next time we meet,” said Hermione as she walked off into the crowd.

“Healer? Marry? What's going on?” asked a thunderstruck Ron.

“Ronald, I thought you were brilliant today,” said a dreamy female voice from behind him.

Ron spun around and saw Luna Lovegood approaching him. She was wearing a dress of many clashing colors that looked to be made completely out of frilly scarves. She also wore a headband and earrings that matched the dress – well at least in poor taste they matched.

“I'm – er, um, thanks, Luna,” muttered Ron as he gaped at her attire.

“I think you're a hero and that you should be treated that way,” said Luna as she walked very near him.

Luna put both of her arms around the now paralyzed Ron. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him gently on the lips.

Ron was too shocked and scared to contest her affection. He couldn't move a muscle or sound even the smallest noise of protest. All he could do was stand there as she lavished his face with kisses.

“Luna Celeste Lovegood!” boomed a voice from the pitch.

Luna let go of him and took a nervous step back. Ron now could move and turned to see the source of the voice.

Mars was standing on the pitch. He looked a combination of mad, amused and

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impressed as he walked toward Ron and Luna.

“Are you using the skills I've taught you to sneak into Ron's dreams in order to trick him into liking you?” demanded Mars.

Luna looked up guiltily at Mars for a few seconds and then started giggling uncontrollably.

“Oh dear,” said Mars and then he sighed.

“Dreams? What are you on about, Mars?” asked Ron.

“Luna has some of the same talents as I, Ron. One of them is being able to visit others in their dreams,” explained Mars.

“Like you do with Harry and Hermione?” asked Ron.

“Like I do with lots of people.”

“But not me? Why?” asked Ron.

“Well its nothing personal, Ron – ” started Mars.

“You never remember them, Ronald,” said Luna as she stepped closer to them.

“It's true. I've tried several times to get you to be the one to wake up Harry and come meet me. While I do manage to force you awake, you just roll over and go back to sleep,” said Mars.

“So how long has she been kissing me without me knowing it?” demanded Ron.

“Oh you always know about it, Ronald, and you never object. You just don't remember,” said Luna airily as she snuggled up to him.

“Luna, this is hardly responsible use of the knowledge I've given you,” said Mars like he was scolding a four year old for spilling her juice.

Ron wasn't sure what confused him more: the hug that Luna was giving him now, the knowledge that she had been visiting him in his dreams for quite a while or seeing Mars going so soft on a student that was blatantly breaking his own rules.

Luna let go of Ron and then looked straight into the eyes of Mars. “Are you saying

that you didn't visit the dreams of any girls that you liked when you were sixteen?" She grinned mischievously.

"There are plenty of other mistakes I made as I teenager that I doubt you would want to repeat. I will deal with your transgressions later, please leave us now," said Mars.

Luna didn't look the least bit worried about the implied punishments. She simply smiled up at Ron and said, "Remember I'll always be there for you Ron." She then disappeared.

Mars shook his head and said, "That's one unique girl."

"Unique? Loony's more like it," said Ron.

"Seers tend to be a loony bunch. Anyways. Ron, Harry will wake you in a couple of seconds. You won't remember any of this and I will make sure no one, especially Hermione, finds out."

Ron nodded at Mars. He was still a bit numb from everything he had experienced. Mars waved and then was gone.

"Ron!" said a voice. "Wake up will you? We have to hurry, Mars told me we're already behind schedule."

"Huh?"

"C'mon, get dressed we have to meet Mars," said Harry as he changed out of his pajamas.

"I was having a great dream, Harry, or was it a weird one?" asked Ron apprehensively.

"Was it about quidditch?" asked Harry.

"I think so," answered Ron, rubbing his eyes.

"Well that's all you've talked about since we killed Hufflepuff," said Harry.

"There was something else though, but what was it?" said Ron.

"You never remember them, Ron, don't worry about it. Just hurry up."

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Ron sat in his four poster bed for a few moments trying to focus on the fleeting memories he had of his dreams, but it was for not; He remembered nothing as usual. Ron got out of his bed and joined Harry in getting dressed.

Mars was waiting for them inside the secret entrance to the cave. Once the door sealed itself he spoke very seriously.

“While I hope neither of you ever master the Killing Curse, we will find out tonight if you can cast it effectively. Follow me.”

He continued to speak as they wound their way through the complex.

“Avada Kedavra, is usually a poor combat spell. Stunners and impediment jinxes are faster to cast and do not take as much out of you. One of the reasons Tom Riddle became such a formidable dueler was how fast and how often he could cast the Killing Curse.”

Mars stopped before the entrance to the last cave. The paintings of the two witches both looked at Harry and Ron with sympathy in their eyes.

“Tonight there is a risk that one of you maybe lost to the Dark Side forever,” said Mars.

“Never!” said Harry.

“That's rubbish,” exclaimed Ron.

“I'm glad to see your confidence. While I cannot tell beforehand if either of you are vulnerable, we will know very soon afterward. You will leave here tonight knowing for sure,” replied Mars.

“But why would tonight be any different than before? We've both used the curse many times now,” asked Harry.

“Because tonight your victim will not be an insect or an arthropod,” answered Mars.

“You mean ...”

“A human? You want us to kill a human being tonight?” asked a shocked Ron.

“I’ll let you two decide if you think she qualifies,” said Mars, heading into the room.

Harry looked questioningly at Ron, but Ron had no answers for his best friend. He merely shrugged and they both followed the Texan into the large cave. The three stopped about twelve feet from an armchair with its back toward them. Ron could tell someone was tied up in it, but he couldn’t see any of their features.

Mars’ wand jumped to his right hand and he twirled it in the direction of the armchair. The chair slowly spun around until the occupant was facing them. It was a woman with a skull like face that had been ravaged by the horrors of Azkaban for many years. She had thick eyelids and long dark hair. Ron recognized her instantly from the wanted posters he had seen of her after she had escaped from prison – it was Bellatrix Lestrange!

Harry swore loudly and leaped at Lestrange. Mars, however, seemed ready for such an action and snatched Harry off the ground with one hand and seized Harry’s wand with the other. Harry hopelessly tried to escape.

“Harry! Do you think for a second that she shall live through the night? Stay your bloodlust until we can combine it with the thirst for justice! Bellatrix Lestrange is the perfect target for tonight’s lesson,” said Mars.

“I don’t want to kill her with a spell. I want to use my bare hands!” snarled Harry as he tried to get away.

“This exactly how we lose wizards to the Dark Side, Harry. This spell must not be used in a rage your first time, you will too easily be seduced by its power. You must not enjoy the sensation or else you will seek its potency again and again,” demanded Mars.

Harry however continued to try and reach Bellatrix.

Mars’ face darkened slightly with anger and he then threw Harry roughly onto the

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stone floor. Mars then bellowed in a voice that was as loud as thunder:

“DO TRUST ME OR NOT?”

Ron took his hands from his ears and said quickly, “Yes, Mars, of course.”

Harry looked up from the floor. “I-I'm sorry Mars. I trust you more than anyone. My anger just got the best of me, it-it won't happen again.”

Mars smiled at Harry and gave him a hand up.

“I can understand losing your temper for a moment, Harry, but you must always be willing to listen to reason. Now let's get know Bellatrix a little better. Believe me it will be much easier to kill her then,” said Mars grimly as he moved to the chair.

“Oh my love, you are back!” said Bellatrix in a loving and insane tone. “Why have you have brought Harry Potter and a Weasley child here?” Her tone turned considerably sour when she mentioned the boys.

“My love?” said Harry in disgust.

“Yes, Harry, she is more demented than we could have ever imagined. Even his closest followers are not trusted by Riddle. They're kept on a strict need to know basis. Even when they must know something, because say they participated in it, he will often put a memory block on them.

“For three weeks I have interrogated Bellatrix with Legilimens and she has little sanity left. I have learned a great deal from her, but unfortunately she is not known for her brains. She is a warrior in every sense of the word and cared little about the internal politics of the Death Eaters.

“She loves power you see, more than anything. That is what attracted her to Riddle in the first place and now it seems she has decided – ”

“You *are* power my love. You are much like him, only greater, and not so boring. Together we would be magnificent!” said Bellatrix insanely before she broke off into cackling.

“She's bent!” said Ron.

Mars nodded and then lead the boys away from her. He gave them a few last minute tips and bade them to prepare themselves for the casting of the curse.

Ron closed his eyes and remembered Neville's parents. She had tortured them for days so that now they did not recognize their own son. He remembered her coldly suggesting that Ginny be tortured to death. Ron snarled. He knew that she had killed Sirius and laughed at Harry's pain. She had escaped imprisonment and killed again. He felt no pity for such a murderous monster as her. No one was safe while she lived. Justice demanded her death!

Ron opened his eyes and noticed he had instinctively moved his wand into the starting position for the curse. His mind raced with the thoughts of violence.

“Justice for Sirius!” he thought “She's a monster, she'll kill again. I must stop her!”

“Now!” commanded Mars.

“Avada Kedavra!” they cried and green flashes of light shot from their wands. The sound of rushing death sped after the light and Bellatrix Lestrange collapsed against her bonds, lifeless.

“She now joins the hundreds of innocents she sent to the grave. Her black soul no longer defiles our world.”

Ron thought no eulogy could have topped Mars' words.

“Follow me quickly, boys.”

He lead them to a table and bade the boys to sit in some chairs that had buckets beside each and a range of what looked like medicinal bottles in front of them on the table.

“What are the buckets for?” asked Harry.

“I'm afraid you'll find out soon enough,” replied Mars sadly.

The three then chatted for a quarter of an hour. The subjects were light hearted and

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Ron began to cheer up a bit, but then his stomach lurched. He felt wretched and knew he was going to throw up.

A guttural and malignant voice croaked inside his head, “You killed a human being in cold blood!”

Ron slid out of the chair writhing in pain and guilt. He felt as if he were being lashed with a barbed whip of accusations. He moved himself over the bucket and became violently ill. He felt blood and bile mixed in with his dinner as it came up. After several minutes he weakly lifted his head and whispered, “But she was a killer, a monster.”

“Joined her club now have you?” accused the vile voice.

“Filth!” Ron screamed. “I’m covered in it.”

He then looked for his wand to cast the scouring charm on his skin in to cleanse himself. It was no where to be seen so he tried scraping the filth off himself with his nails. He fell onto the floor ripping off his own skin. Soon he was bleeding on his arms, neck and stomach. Mars seized him and poured a liquid on the scratches that stopped the pain and bleeding, but Ron still felt contaminated.

“Did you enjoy the power?” demanded the voice.

“No!” protested Ron.

“You lie poorly, but that’s always been true hasn’t it, ickle Ronniekins?”

“Shut up,” Ron said weakly.

“You are free now. You have escaped the shadows of your brothers. Embrace your new path of liberation,” said the voice. It was no longer monstrous but melodic and inviting.

Ron covered his ears, but it did not stop the voice.

“Free from laws, morals and commitments, you can realize your ambitions. Seize the spotlight for yourself, Ronald Weasley. It is your time.”

Ron stopped struggling for a second. He had always wanted to be famous, to be

known as something other than Harry Potter's friend or someone's little brother.

“But at what cost?” he asked himself.

A moment later he said then aloud, “I am not evil. I have morals.”

“Tell that to Bellatrix over there. Gave her a real sporting chance didn't you?”

“Shut up! Shut up!” he yelled as he beat himself hard about the ears.

Mars grabbed Ron, sat him up on the floor and held his shoulders. The American stared into his eyes and soon Ron could hear Mars' voice inside his head.

“You've done what you must to stop evil, nothing more. You are not unclean Ronald Weasley. Reject them Ron, the voices offer nothing but lies.”

Normal feelings slowly passed back into Ron. He looked over and saw Harry sitting as he was. Harry looked a little haggard and bewildered, but Ron was sure he himself looked as bad. He still felt a little ill from vomiting, a bit dirty from being on the floor and sore from the writhing around, but no longer felt unclean or hated himself.

“Has it passed?” asked Harry.

Mars nodded and then helped them to their feet.

“I have a boat to take us across the lake. I doubt either of you are up for flying,” said Mars as they walked through the complex.

Ron nodded silently.

“Did you go through that your first time, Mars?” asked Harry.

“Yes. I was alone and it lasted for eight or so hours. I almost killed my self from guilt during the process. I was terrified you two would suffer as badly as I did.”

“Why didn't we then?” asked Ron.

“I taught you in a way that would minimize the pain of the periculum that all must face when they first use the dark arts to kill. I also knew what to bring to help ease your suffering, though I could not prevent it,” answered Mars.

Mars walked them to Gryffindor Tower. Before they opened the painting of the Fat

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Lady he told them:

“Your lessons were much too exhausting for you to attend classes tomorrow. I have sent word to all of your teachers notifying them and instructed them to also excuse you from any work that you miss. Goodnight, boys.”

The last bit of news cheered them up a little as they made their weary ways to bed.

Chapter Twenty-Five – Paved With Good Intentions



“Remember, just the middle desk. Jump it over the next row of them,” said Mars.

“Right,” said Harry nervously. He pointed his wand at the row of three desks.

Mars returned to the lab to check on the other students.

For three lessons now Harry had been trying to learn the Displacement Charm, without success. Not so much as a single globe had shot out of his wand when he said the incantation. Harry remembered Hermione telling him that it was a very difficult charm to cast, and virtually impossible to control. Right now Harry would settle for no control at

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all. He just wanted something to happen when he cast the spell.

“Displacio!” cried Harry, and he got his wish.

Red globes flew in all directions from his wand. The middle desk took off into the air, propelled by the globes; however, the two desks beside it also took off. In fact, every desk in the room, including the ones Hermione and Padma were sitting at, started bouncing off of ceiling, walls and floor.

The girls screamed when their desks became airborne, but nimbly slipped out of them and crawled under the work table – which thankfully did not follow the desks' example.

“Harry, stop it!” shrieked Hermione from under the table.

“I'm not doing anything now. They're on their – ouch!” said Harry as one of the desks hit him in the side.

Mars heard the commotion; he reentered the classroom, waved his wand and cried “Evanescio!” The desks all vanished immediately.

“Harry, you managed to cast the spell! That's great,” Mars beamed.

“Oh, yes, just superb,” said Hermione sarcastically as she stood up.

“Absolutely fabulous,” said Padma mockingly. Hermione helped Padma to her feet. Padma scowled. “What do you do for an encore, toss all the fish out of the lake?”

Just then, the bell rang, signaling the end of class. Hermione and Padma packed their bags and left without speaking to Harry. The rest of the class spilled in from the lab; a few students asked Harry about the missing desks. He ignored them and started packing his own bag.

“Did you manage the spell this time?” asked Ron.

“Yeah, all the desks in the room went bonkers – including the one with Hermione in it,” answered Harry.

Ron frowned. “I'd wondered why she left without us.”

“Harry, come up here, would you?” Mars called from his desk.

Harry threw his bag over his shoulder; he and Ron walked to the front of the classroom.

After Mars said goodbye to the last lingering students, he turned to Ron and Harry. “Harry, I need you to do me a favor this week.”

“Of course; what is it?”

“I’d like you to substitute for me in my second year classes. I’m a bit busy, so it would help out a lot if you taught the Slytherin/Hufflepuff class Wednesday after lunch, and the Gryffindor/Ravenclaw class Thursday before lunch.”

Harry smiled. If Mars was letting him teach the second years, that must mean that he was happy with the job Harry had done with the first years.

“Sure, I’ll do it, Mars. What’s the lesson?” asked Harry.

“Here’s the lesson plan, and a few instructions to guide you,” said Mars, handing a scroll to Harry.

They said goodbye to Mars and walked to the courtyard for break.

“What’s the lesson, Harry?” asked Ron.

Harry unrolled the scroll. “Dealing with boggarts. He has one for each class to practice on.”

“Boggarts?” said Ron with a fond look on his face. “I remember that lesson with Professor Lupin. One of the best we’ve ever had.”

Harry remembered that lesson with Lupin. Boggarts were nasty little creatures that preferred to live in confined spaces. What made them interesting was their unique defense mechanism. The boggart sensed what its confronter feared most and transformed itself into that image. Ron, of course, feared spiders, so his boggart turned into a giant spider; Hermione’s greatest fear was being told that she had failed all of her classes.

Professor Lupin had not let Harry face the boggart in class because he had assumed

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that Harry's worst fear was Lord Voldemort, and he hadn't want to upset his class by having the Dark Lord pop in during a lesson. Harry wondered if Mars had asked him to teach the classes because Mars was worried about something similar happening.

Ron appeared to be thinking along the same lines. “You know, Harry, I was just wondering what Mars would see if he confronted a boggart. I mean, what could scare a wizard like him? Certainly not a spider or a dementor. He's not even afraid of Voldemort.”

“Maybe one of those Malsumis things would show up? I think that's why he wants me to teach the class. It's probably not a good idea to show a bunch of second years something that would rate as Mars' greatest fear,” said Harry.

Ron nodded in agreement, but Harry suspected he was up to something from his scheming expression.

Wednesday after lunch, Harry looked over the two queues of second year students as he approached the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Both the Slytherin and Hufflepuff students stared at Harry with interest as he let them inside. While he had not made friends with these Slytherins yet, Harry was sure that Mars' influence over the past year would make them easier to deal with.

Harry walked over to the lab door and opened it. He saw that, in addition to the normal training equipment, two crates had now been placed on the floor along the back wall. They both moved and rattled ominously.

“That ought to scare them a bit,” thought Harry, smiling. He picked up one of the crates and carried it back to his desk. He slammed the crate onto it, hoping to annoy the boggart into rattling the crate some more. It worked: the crate shook so much that it nearly waddled off the desk. The students gasped, and most leaned back in their chairs.

“Boggarts,” said Harry dramatically, “know your deepest, darkest fear. When you face a boggart, that fear appears before you, because the boggart can take any form it

needs to frighten you away.”

The class seemed interested, but apprehensive.

Harry explained that the key to defeating a boggart was laughter. He told the students to think of what they feared most, and then think of what would make it humorous. To help the class understand, he related the story of Neville facing the boggart in his third year class. Even the Slytherins laughed at his description of Snape wearing Neville's grandmother's dress and hand bag.

Harry explained that a boggart was often confused when facing many foes because it could not choose which form to assume, so it was always best to face one with a friend. Lastly, Harry warned his students that when he confronted a boggart, he always saw a dementor, so they should be prepared to see one today.

The students performed very well against the boggart, each and every one of them successfully casting the spell and turning their worst fear into a joke. The lesson hit only one snag: just before Harry finished off the boggart, it turned into a dementor, which caused Rose Zeller to lose her head completely and run screaming across the room. Once he had calmed Rose down, Harry congratulated the students and dismissed them early. They chatted excitedly about the lesson as they trailed out, and left Harry with the feeling that he may have made a few friends today.

“How'd the lesson go, Harry?” a voice asked.

Harry looked up and was surprised to Ron squeezing in past the departing students.

“Quite well, actually. Are you checking up on me, Mr. Prefect?” Harry smiled.

Ron wrinkled his nose. He asked offhandedly, “Did the boggart survive the lesson?”

Harry was taken aback. Why would Ron ask that? “No, the laughter and my last spell finished it off. Why?”

“Well,” said Ron, fidgeting nervously. “I suppose I'd have to tell you sometime. I

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was hoping one of your boggarts would survive because I think it would make a great joke.”

“A joke? Ron, boggarts can cause real mayhem. Remember your mum last year?” said Harry seriously.

“I don't want to pull this on one of our mates, Harry. I'm talking about Malfoy.”

“Malfoy!” said Harry. “Now, that's different.”

Ron smiled at him.

“Okay, tomorrow I'll force the boggart back into his crate before the students' laughing can finish it off. But we need to keep this to ourselves. Don't tell Hermione; she'd be furious with us, even if it is Malfoy that we're scaring,” said Harry, as they left for Gryffindor Tower.

“Too right about that,” agreed Ron.

Harry spent the rest of the day smiling whenever he anticipated the terrified look on Malfoy's face.

At the end of Thursday's lesson, Harry was nervous about crating the boggart: he didn't want to seem too worried about its survival. However, he was able to successfully force it back into its box without arousing his students' suspicions. When Harry dismissed the class, Ron was waiting outside and pushed his way in against the outgoing traffic. He saw the shaking crate and grinned evilly.

“Excellent!” he exclaimed, picking up the container. “C'mon, Harry; I'll explain the plan while we take this thing to its hiding place.”

Ron told Harry about the prefects meeting scheduled for later that night in the Great Hall. Malfoy would have to walk through the dungeons' entrance on his way to the meeting. Ron pointed to a ledge above the entrance that looked just large enough to set the boggart's crate sideways.

“We'll get down here early and put the crate up there with the top facing out. Then

we wait for Malfoy on that staircase over there,” said Ron, pointing across the entrance hall. “Once he gets near the crate, we cast Alohomora and it opens up, dropping the boggart right in front of him.”

“That's brilliant, Ron! We'll skive off right after he wets himself. He'll never know it was us,” said Harry, grinning.

“This should be a perfect hiding place meanwhile,” said Ron, carrying the crate to a broom cupboard. “Filch rarely uses it.”

Ron put the crate in the cupboard and closed the door. He took out his wand and said “Colloportus!” and the door sealed itself with an odd squelching noise.

“He's a squib, so he shouldn't be able to get past that,” said Ron.

Ron and Harry looked carefully around the hall to make sure they hadn't been observed. Spotting no one, they left for the Great Hall in good spirits and with great anticipation. However, if they had looked up as well as around, the boys may not have left quite so happily.

After Transfiguration, the boys studied with Hermione and Ginny until supper. They chatted innocently with Hermione and Ginny as they ate. When they had finished their meal, Ron grabbed Harry by the arm and said, “We need to see Mars. He wanted to ask you how the classes went, remember?”

“He did?” replied Harry “I don't – ouch,” Ron stepped on his toe and looked at him fiercely.

“The boggart lesson, remember?” Ron gritted.

“Oh, right,” Harry flushed.

“Ron, there's a prefect meeting tonight at – ” Hermione began.

“I know when it is. Don't nag,” Ron interrupted.

Hermione scowled grumpily and left for Gryffindor Tower.

The boys immediately made for the cupboard, but halfway there, a voice distracted

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them.

“Teach the students to hurt poor Peevsy, will you?” said the poltergeist crossly as he flew over Ron and Harry.

“What's he talking about?” asked Harry.

“I'm more worried about what he's carrying,” said Ron, pointing up.

Harry focused on Peeves' baggage – the boggart crate was in his hands.

“Oh, yes, here is something that will scare the red wizard,” Peeves cackled.

“Peeves, no!” shouted Harry as the poltergeist rounded the corner of the Defense Against the Dark Arts corridor. Harry and Ron exchanged horrified glances and then sped after him. The poltergeist was out of sight when the boys turned into the hallway; they sprinted down it at full speed. The hall ended in a T.

“Which way?” asked Ron, panting.

“I think he's looking for Mars,” Harry gasped. “Towards his office,” he suggested. They took off to the right.

Peeves managed to keep just ahead of them as they ran down the halls, always just zipping out of sight around the next corner. They finally stopped in a large open room near the North tower with an enormous statue of the Ravenclaw eagle. Peeves was nowhere in sight. They looked around the room as they caught their breath.

“If he's looking for Mars, why did he head *this* way?” asked Ron.

“I'm not sure. I know Mars gets along with Trelawney; maybe he came up to see her?” answered Harry, panting.

They heard cackling from the corridor on their left; quickly, they ran down it. They went up a staircase and around two more left turns, up another flight of stairs, through several rooms, and then into a large room with a balcony on one end. The balcony overlooked the room with the statue of the Ravenclaw eagle. Peeves was hovering in the room below, next to a doorway, with the crate in his hands. Harry could see Mars

approaching from a connecting hallway; he started to yell a warning, but Mars screamed first – Peeves had dumped the boggart out of the crate in front of the corridor, just a dozen feet ahead of Mars.

“NO!” yelled Mars, staggering backwards.

“IT SHALL NOT BE!” he thundered. “I don't care how often you haunt me, or how clear you appear, you WILL NOT HAPPEN!”

Harry looked at the boggart to see what form it had taken. No monster or demon stood there, just a nightmare of the worst kind. Hermione's body was stretched out on the floor. She was motionless, and her skin had a sick green tint to it. Foam surrounded her lips, and in her hand was a potion beaker; even from the balcony Harry could read the label: Manticore poison. Harry froze; feelings of fear, shock, bewilderment, and unbearable sadness crushed him. He could do nothing but watch.

Mars wiped tears from his eyes and took a step toward the boggart.

“Away with you, vision! I shall pay any price to thwart you. Do you hear me? THIS GIRL SHALL LIVE!” Mars shook his fists angrily.

For the second time, Harry witnessed Mars in a full-blown rage. The Texan's eyes were alight with sparks; tiny lightning bolts flashed all around him. Harry's hair stood up on end, and his skin broke out in goose bumps. A sudden wind whipped through the large room, and Harry shivered involuntarily as the temperature plummeted. He felt Ron shaking in fear next to him.

Peeves let out a frightened cry that caught Mars' ear. The red wizard's head cocked, and he stepped into the room. Peeves hovered in the air, staring at Mars, looking as terrified as Harry felt.

“Peeves?” said Mars, confused and enraged. He looked down at Hermione's body. “A boggart?” he said quietly. Then he roared, “A BOGGART?” turning his head and his wand toward the poltergeist.

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Peeves held out trembling hands and shook his head speechlessly.

Mars twirled his wand in a circle and shouted, “Macto Phasma!” A bright circle of light appeared, and from it shot a white beam that hit Peeves in the torso. The poltergeist screamed in horrible agony for several seconds and then was gone, totally disintegrated.

Mars then turned his powerful gaze onto the boggart. He zagged his wand around and cried “Deflagro!” The boggart burst violently into flames and was nothing but ashes within seconds.

The wind died down, and Harry's skin felt normal again. He could now breathe properly; he did his best to make no noise as he gulped air. He and Ron backed quietly off of the balcony and into the room above. They had no wish to let the furious and grieving Mars know of their presence.

When the boys had reached the first staircase, they sat down. Neither said a word; they sat there for well over an hour. The implications of the awful scene played over and over through Harry's mind. Why was Mars' greatest fear the thought of Hermione killing herself? Harry knew Mars was a powerful seer, and judging by the way Mars had acted when he saw the boggart's form, Harry guessed that Mars must have seen Hermione's suicide previously in a vision. In fact, from his words, it seemed Mars' visions foretold the event as very likely. Hermione was the smartest girl Harry had ever met. What possibly could cause her to do something so stupid?

Eventually Harry realized that he and Ron had to return to Gryffindor Tower. He nudged his friend in the ribs and helped him to his feet.

“I guess you missed the prefect meeting,” said Harry as they walked down the stairs.

Ron didn't even acknowledge Harry's comment. He simply kept walking, like a zombie.

Once they reached the Gryffindor Common room, Ron immediately headed for the

boys' dormitory; however, Hermione spotted them first. She stood up from her armchair near the fireplace and yelled, “How could you've missed the meeting? I reminded you right after dinner!”

Ron turned towards her. Tears were rolling down his face. He said nothing, but walked up to her and hugged her tightly. Hermione looked flabbergasted. Ron leaned down, kissed her gently on the forehead, and let go of her. He walked straight up the staircase to his dormitory and entered it without saying a word.

“Harry,” said Hermione, looking frightened. “What's wrong with him? What happened?”

The entire room stared at Harry as he tried to form a reply. He simply could not come up with an answer to her query. A few tears rolled down his own face at the memory of her lying dead in the North Tower. Harry quickly turned away from her. “We – we – I just can't, can't,” he replied incoherently.

Ginny joined Hermione, now looking equally worried and confused.

Harry managed to say “Goodnight,” and followed Ron's path up to their dorm. He didn't even notice if Ron was in bed before he laid down and drew his curtains. Harry was very grateful for his Occlumency lessons as he blanked his mind of painful memories and fell into slumber.

Ron woke Harry very early the next morning.

“We need to talk before Hermione gets up, but not here,” said Ron.

Harry nodded sleepily. After a few minutes he was up and dressed, and the boys left their dormitory for the staircase. A few steps before the door to the common room, Ron held up his hand and Harry stopped.

“Mark Evans has been putting a sensor charm on one of the steps near the bottom of the staircase,” explained Ron.

He pointed his wand down and said “Amitto!” A hissing sound came from the step,

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and a second later Harry heard a snap. Ron nodded and they finished their descent. Once in the Common Room, Ron called out, "Lily, are you there?"

The small bird flew up from behind them and landed on Ron's arm. He drew her close to his face.

"Are we alone in the Common Room?" he asked the woodpecker.

She nodded.

"Can you leave us to ourselves for ten minutes? Mars should understand that we need some privacy," said Ron.

She nodded again and flew off from his arm. She dove at the door to the girls' dormitory and then disappeared somehow underneath it.

"We have to ask Mars why his greatest fear is Hermione killing herself," said Ron.

"You sure you want to do that?" asked Harry. "He'll find out that the boggart was our fault."

"Harry, this is her life we're discussing. I don't care about getting in trouble."

"Neither do I, but Mars didn't just give Peeves detention, did he?" asked Harry.

"But we can't just sit back and hope it doesn't happen," stated Ron firmly.

"I agree, but remember Mars screaming that he wouldn't allow it to happen? I bet he's doing everything he can to stop it already," answered Harry.

"I guess you're right," said Ron gloomily. "But us keeping a close eye on her wouldn't hurt anything, would it?"

"No, it wouldn't. We should also get Ginny to help us. Hermione confides a lot in her," suggested Harry.

Ron agreed, and the boys headed down to an early breakfast.

Chapter Twenty-Six – The First Casualty of War



Harry and his three friends set out for the last Hogsmeade visit of the year. It was the beginning of May and an absolutely beautiful day. He, Ron and Ginny had kept a

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close eye on Hermione the past three weeks and she had given them no signs of being suicidal. While Ginny never really believed that there was any reason to worry about Hermione, Harry and Ron spent many tense days observing her; Ginny had not witnessed the boggart incident after all. Hermione, however, seemed to be in such good spirits as they walked, that Harry just could not imagine her taking her own life.

“Hi Padma, Hi Luna,” said Ginny to the two Ravenclaw girls as they neared Harry's group.

“Where are you lot headed?” asked Padma.

“To Madam Puddifoot's Tearoom, want to join us?” asked Hermione.

Luna nodded.

Padma replied, “Sure, but I have to stop by the Post Office first. I need to hire a long range bird to send a letter to Delhi. It's my cousin, Pari's, birthday on Tuesday.”

“No problem,” said Harry. “It's along the way.”

The Ravenclaws joined their group and they continued walking. This year Harry had become quite accustomed to being friends with students from the other houses. Many of the second years that he had only given one lesson were now very friendly to him. He thought it was a nice change from –

The sound of women screaming up ahead snapped Harry out of his thought process.

“What's going on?” asked Hermione.

Two terrified witches ran past them. The witches were followed by three wizards, each carrying a young child, who looked just as scared. The last man shouted a warning as he passed the students:

“Kids, run for your lives! They're here!”

“Do you think he means Death Eaters, Harry?” asked Ginny nervously.

“Sounds like it,” said Harry as he and Ron drew out their wands. The girls followed

suit.

“C'mon,” said Harry as he started around the corner from where the people had fled.

When they rounded the corner Harry saw two Death Eaters in robes and masks. They were standing in front of a house that was directly across the street from the Post Office. No other people were visible.

The smaller Death Eater waved her wand and shouted in a female voice “MORSMORDRE!”

An enormous green skull appeared above the home and rose into the sky – the two Death Eaters disappeared. Like the previous time Harry had seen the Dark Mark, the skull looked as if it was made of emerald stars and had an evil serpent as a tongue. This time, however, because Harry knew its meaning, the Mark seemed much more sinister.

Hermione screamed in terror and grabbed Ron's arm. “That house,” she said as she trembled, “it's where the Herberts live.”

Harry heard the others gasp and he then felt Ginny push past him.

“Oh no, she's right,” said Ginny. “We have to see if they're okay.”

Ginny then slowly walked nearer the home. The others followed closely behind her. A few townspeople were now in the streets, also approaching the house. Several could be heard demanding to know where the aurors were.

Something buzzed by Harry's face making him jump. The others were also surprised, until they saw it was Lilandria – she had landed on Ginny's shoulder. The teens continued their slow march down the street. When they were about a half a block from the Herberts, there was a loud apparating crack. Mars appeared in front of the house causing all to freeze.

The red wizard looked up at the Dark Mark in disgust. After glaring at it for a few seconds, Mars advanced on the Herbert's front door. Another apparating sound was then

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heard and Dumbledore appeared several feet behind the Texan. Mars turned to face him.

Dumbledore shared Mars' disgusted look as he gazed upon the skull. The Headmaster then lifted his wand and jabbed it at the Mark.

“Amitto!” cried Dumbledore, and the skull started hissing. After a few seconds, there was a very loud bang and the Mark was no longer present.

A moment later Steele appeared next to Dumbledore. She looked up at Mars, but he ignored her.

“The Herbert's?” asked Dumbledore.

Mars grunted affirmatively and reached out to grab the front door.

“Be careful, the house could be trapped,” cautioned Dumbledore.

Mars nodded and opened the door slowly with his right hand. With the door open Mars then put his left palm on the inside of it. He again had that look on his face like he was trying to see something very far in the distance. After thirty or so seconds he spoke, “There were six of them. They came in the back way and attacked Judy first. They then captured the children. And and ...,” said Mars as his voice broke. “Vile creatures! In front of their father's eyes ... tortured – and killed – all of them!”

“Just horrible,” he whispered.

Mars' right hand then snapped the brass door handle off. His eyes had lost the far away look and were now filling with sparks of rage.

“Who does that to a child?” thundered Mars.

“A monster. Nothing less is capable of their deeds,” responded Dumbledore.

“A monster?” said Mars angrily. His eyes were now shimmering. “We fight not wizards and witches, but monsters you say? Well, there are no rules when you fight monsters, you just kill them before they kill you. Isn't that right?”

“What are you saying, Mars?” asked Dumbledore.

“I'm saying, they too can be touched. Everyone has vulnerabilities and weak links.

Not all of their assets can be concealed like their leaders that hide from me,” answered Mars who now had his wand in his hand.

“You must not lower yourself to their level, Mars,” warned Dumbledore sternly.

Both wizards looked very angry as they faced each other. Harry felt Ginny lean in under his left arm and put an arm of hers around his waist – she was trembling. He himself was too confused to feel scared. He could've never imagined Dumbledore and Mars shouting at each other.

Harry felt his hairs begin to stand on ends as Mars replied, “If my enemy is in the gutter, then it is there that I must kill him.”

“I implore you Mars. The war cannot be won this way. You agreed with me on this when you first arrived,” responded Dumbledore, whose eyes were also alight and his whole body glowed with power.

“If we had done things my way, the war would have already been won!” barked Mars as he approached to within five feet of Dumbledore.

“But at what cost?” demanded Dumbledore as his unblinking eyes stared straight into Mars'.

“Costs?” thundered Mars. He then pointed at the Herbert's house. “The costs of your mistakes lie before us for all to see. They are but the first of the innocents doomed to die because of your inaction!”

Dumbledore's blaze of anger ceded. His eyes were no longer full of fire, but of pain and sadness.

“I will stand no more idleness!” shouted Mars. “My brethren shall be summoned.” Mars paused for a few seconds and then added icily, “Blood will follow blood.”

Dumbledore stood in place looking very shocked.

“Sally, you will stay with Harry until I return,” ordered Mars.

“Angel no! I would be at your side,” shouted Steele fiercely.

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“Do you defy me, Commander?”

Steele stood up straight, snapped her feet together and nodded smartly to him. “As you demand.”

CRACK

Mars was gone.

Lily took off from Ginny's arm and flew up into the air and out of sight.

A haze of confusion still lingered in the area. No one said a word for over a minute until Steele broke the silence, “Professor, we should get your students back to the castle don't you think?”

The Headmaster snapped out of his trance, “Yes Sally, that is a prudent idea.”

Steele flashed Dumbledore a nasty look that he didn't see.

Dumbledore said, “Sonorus,” and held his wand to his throat. “Attention Hogwarts students. This is Headmaster Dumbledore speaking, you are to immediately head back to the castle. No delays, no matter how short or important will be accepted. Once you reach the castle, go straight to your common rooms. Any teachers in Hogwarts are requested to assist with the return of the students and then meet in the staffroom. Thank you.”

“C'mon, y'all heard the Headmaster,” said Steele as she nudged Harry back towards Hogwarts. “He said no delays.”

The subdued group of students and Steele started walking back to the school – Dumbledore had stayed in Hogsmeade to supervise the return. Once they were out of the village Hermione looked up at Steele.

“What did Mars mean when he said, 'They too can be touched.'?”

“He meant that while Voldemort still operates in secret and is hidden, there are public faces that support his cause but not openly. These faces will be touched,” answered Steele.

“Like the Committee Against Dark Sorcerers?” asked Hermione.

“Yes darlin', exactly like them. I expect they and a few others will not have a good week,” replied Steele who then put her arm around Ginny who was still shaking.

“But I remember Dumbledore telling Mars that he didn't want open war with CADS.” said Harry.

“Angel can be subtle hon, but he may not be this time,” answered Steele who was still looking at Ginny. “Honey, why are you still trembling?” she asked Ginny kindly, but Harry noticed her eyes were as cold as ever.

“I've never seen him so mad,” answered a frightened Ginny. “His eyes were scaring me – I don't like being frightened of him. And he-he was yelling at Dumbledore. I never imagined that could happen.”

“Now don't be so worried. Those two have had arguments before – Angel always forgives him in the end,” said Steele.

Hermione shot a vicious look up at Steele, but if the Defender noticed it she wasn't letting on.

Steele escorted the Gryffindors all the way up to the Fat Lady. Once there she bid them good day and watched them enter the tower. Lunch was being served in the common rooms so food was covering many of the tables. The four sat down and ate their meal silently.

After he finished eating, Harry didn't know what to do. There was simply no way he could manage any homework, even with his Occlumency training, and he didn't feel like joining the discussions of the other Gryffindors. Rampant rumors were flying around the room about what had happened in Hogsmeade. None that Harry could hear were even close to the truth, but he had no wish to relive those awful events by correcting someone.

Ginny, who had finally stopped shaking, stood and walked over to Natalie MacDonald.

“Natalie, do you think you could bring your wizard's wireless box down to the

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Common Room? We could use a bit of news.”

Natalie nodded and headed for the girls' dormitories.

“Good idea, Ginny,” said Harry as she came and sat between he and Ron.

“Do you think,” said Hermione as she stared into the unlit fireplace, “that when Mars said, 'My brethren shall be summoned', he meant more Spirit Defenders?”

“Yeah,” answered Ron. “Who else could it be?”

Hermione sighed and continued to stare at the ashes.

Natalie brought down the wizard's wireless, put it on the top of a hutch and turned it on. Most of the Gryffindors moved to that part of the Common Room to listen to the broadcast.

At first there was a bit of static and then a familiar voice rang out.

“Good evening British wizards and witches, this is Rita Skeeter, coming to you live from the Atrium, in the Ministry of Magic. We have our reporters all across the country to keep you informed of tonight's breaking events.

“Minister Cornelius Fudge's office has announced there will be a very important press briefing in five minutes. Speculation has it that he will appoint CADS Chairwoman Jo Anne Lennon, as Minister of Magic and resign. Several senior members of the Committee are here in person, but not Ms. Lennon herself.”

“Her???” yelled Hermione. “They can't let her be Minister!”

Many other students were also shouting.

“There's no way Fudge would appoint Lennon. He hates her,” said Harry.

“I don't know. Mars did warn us that the Ministry might fall without a fight,” said Ginny quietly so only the four of them could hear.

“Ah yes, here comes the Minister now,” said Rita over the wireless. “Behind him are two wizards. One is a black man wearing an odd outfit. Oh okay I have just been notified that he is a Demon Fighter from the Americas and the other wizard is – oh my,

it's the infamous American, Mars."

"What's he doing there?" demanded Ron.

"Shh," said Hermione.

"The two Demon Fighters are flanking the Minister as he takes the podium."

"Good day citizens and press," started Fudge. "Today has been one of the most difficult days in my life. For the last several hours I have been in meetings with my heads of departments and have finally come to a decision. It is the toughest choice that I have ever made in my long career as Minister of Magic."

"He *is* gonna resign," said Dean Thomas.

"As of this moment, Jo Anne Lennon, chairwoman of the Committee Against Dark Sorcerers, is ordered to disband her organization and turn herself in for questioning. All the officers of the Committee, both junior and senior, are also wanted for questioning. Grave charges have been leveled against them from a variety sources and this will be an opportunity for the accused to tell their side of the story. "

"Did he say arrest Lennon rather than appoint her?" asked Rita.

Noises of surprise could be heard coming from the crowd at the Ministry and the Common Room.

"We will give them two weeks to get their affairs in order and then any hold outs will be hunted down. That is all. No questions I am afraid," finished Fudge.

"What a shocking development, instead of –," Rita was saying when screaming interrupted her.

"You can't do this!" screamed a woman from the crowd. "You'll be out of power in a week Fudge."

"Displacio!" cried the unmistakable voice Mars.

More screams were heard.

Rita was now yelling over the commotion. "Mars has now hit the seven CADS

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officers with a Displacement Charm, but how can that be? He, er, used some sort of spell that has them airborne and moving towards a group of aurors. Yes, he has dropped them to the ground and they are being relieved of their wands and arrested.”

Several third year boys clapped and yelled “Get'em Mars!”

Hermione glared at them, “This isn't a match you three!”

The boys all stopped clapping and looked down.

“Let's see if we can get a word with the American. Oy Mars! A word please! This is Rita Skeeter with WWN – oh well he just disappeared. I have however, just been told that an incident is developing in Knockturn Alley. So were are going to hand the broadcast over to our reporter on the spot, Jane Flat-Chest.”

Harry and Ron wrinkled their brows at the comment while many Gryffindors giggled.

“What did that butchy skank just call me?” asked an American accented female voice over the wireless.

“Live wand Jane,” said a man's voice.

“Oh, ahem. This is Jane Flatchet reporting from Graveyard Corner in Knockturn Alley. This building, full of stores long rumored to be trafficking in the Dark Arts, has been surrounded by oddly dressed Demon Fighters and various other wizards. None of them are ministry officials, as far as I can tell. There is a tall red-headed wizard with a pony tail here that seems to be in charge. He and a blond witch with a French accent have enveloped the entire structure in an Anti-Disapparation Jinx. I think the leader is now making his demands to the occupants.”

A loud and familiar voice then came across the wireless.

“You have five minutes to throw out your wands and then exit the building with your hands up. After those five minutes all force necessary will be used to take the building.”

“That was Bill,” said Ginny nervously. She leaned over in her chair and onto Harry's shoulder.

“Sounds like Fleur is with him,” added Hermione. She put her hands over her mouth.

“In five minutes we'll find out how the occupants will respond to this dire warning. Many of You-Know-Who's supporters owned stores here before the first war,” said Jane.

Harry then heard some yelling in the background of the broadcast and he thought he also heard curses being cast.

“Ten people have just taken off on broomsticks from the roof. And the wizards on the ground here are tossing jinxing at them,” explained Jane.

“Displacio!” Harry heard Bill and Fleur cry.

More screams were heard and then a couple of disgusting thuds.

“Eurgh, now that is gross,” said Jane.

“Jane!”

“Yes, um four of those attempting to flee on their brooms were knocked off and fell to their deaths, but the other six seemed to have escaped. Oh a wizard has just apparated here next to the leader. My he is very tall,” said Jane.

“That's him, Jane. That's Mars.”

“Well he's speaking with the leader and that French witch. He looks annoyed by something the red-headed wizard has said. I think the five minute ultimatum is almost up. Wait. The French witch is approaching us. Can you give us your name, Madame?”

“No,” said Fleur's voice. “You are too close. It is verree dangerouse now. Back up, back up. Vite, vite!”

“Are you crazy? I'm not going anywhere, this story is too big. Hey! Quit pointing that wand at us,” barked Jane.

“Displacio!” called out Fleur.

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Jane and her assistant screamed and many thuds were heard over the wireless.

“Well,” said Rita's voice interrupting the silence. “It looks like we lost contact with Jane in Knockturn Alley for now, but don't worry about old Flat-Chest, she's a toughie. This is Rita Skeeter back at the Ministry. Let's crack on shall we? We have Victor, in the small wizarding enclave of Meurtres End in Wiltshire, who tells us Demon Fighters and Ministry wizards have been skirmishing with Death Eaters. Do you have any eye witnesses, Victor?”

“I sure do Rita. Jamie here says he saw the entire confrontation. Could you tell our listeners the events you just witnessed?” asked Victor.

“Four of them mercenaries apparated in front of the Malfoy Manor 'bout ten minutes ago,” explained Jamie.

The mention of the name Malfoy made all the Gryffindors sit up in their chairs and listen more intently.

“They started casting jinxes at the manor, not sure what they all were but I think one of them musta stopped you from apparating, because Mrs. Malfoy came running out of the house trying to get away. But they spotted her right off and all four of them blasted her to bits. No warning or nothing,” said Jamie in disgust.

“In cold blood?” asked Victor.

“Well she had her wand out, but she had no chance. They then set the place on fire and as you can see it's just about burnt down,” explained Jamie.

“What did they do then?” asked Victor.

“The four of them headed over to the Nott house, but they were prepared there. Five wizards and witches in masks stormed out of the house and started throwing curses at the mercenaries. One from each side got hexed really bad, but then six ministry wizards came up from behind the Notts and cursed them in the back,” finished Jamie.

“Thank you Jamie, for that harrowing tale,” said Victor melodramatically. “The

Demon Fighters then torched the Nott house which is burning as we speak. If any more important battles break out here in Wiltshire, you can be sure WWN will be there first! Back to you Rita.”

“What do you mean, we don't have a reporter in north London? Get anybody who can speak English over there now! This is a tremendous opportunity – people eat this stuff up. We haven't had any war coverage in over a decade. Why if I –,” Rita's was yelling until interrupted.

“Live wand, Rita.”

“Oh, yes, lovely. Thank you for that engrossing interview, Victor. We have Jill in Godric's Hollow and Jane has recovered in Knockturn Alley, but first this terribly important announcement:”

Harry heard a group of children singing.

*Fizzing Whizzbies, sherbet that's round
Fizzing Whizzbies, floats off the ground
Fizzing Whizzbies, you'll eat them in haste
Fizzing Whizzbies, you can't beat our taste*

“Hello there, witches and wizards this is Edmund Whizzbie and I am proud to announce that Fizzing Whizzbies are the official sweet of this war against Dark Wizards. The war will be over one day and what better way to celebrate victory than sharing a box of Fizzing Whizzbies floating sherbet balls with your friends. Just remember, one box is never enough! Thank you.”

*Fizzing Whizzbies, sherbet that's round
Fizzing Whizzbies, floats off the ground
Fizzing Whizzbies, you'll eat them in haste
Fizzing Whizzbies, you can't beat our taste*

“This is Rita Skeeter at the Atrium, in the Ministry of Magic and I will be with you all night, keeping you informed on the war. Right now we have Jill in Godric's Hollow, where, from what I hear, the fur is really flying. Is that true, Jill?”

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“There has been intense fighting here, Rita. It has been from street to street and house to house with each side taking casualties,” answered Jill's voice.

“How about civilian casualties? Godric's Hollow is heavily populated,” asked Rita.

“Well, I have been informed by the Ministry that the proper term is now collateral damage. And there certainly has been some here. Even a few muggles were caught in the hexfire after the noise attracted their attention,” said Jill.

“You must have some really scrumptious interviews for us, Jill. Please go ahead with them, so our listening audience can know what a war is *really* like,” said Rita very enthusiastically.

“Rita, I have with me Roger Mossback, who is a retired auror that helped in the fight against Grindelwald, over five decades ago. Mr Mossback, could you tell us what you've seen today?” asked Jill professionally.

“I've seen a lot brave lads and lasses tonight doing the things we should have done years ago,” said Mr Mossback forcefully.

“What things do you mean?” asked Jill.

“Standing up to those dark wizards, what else? We're getting soft in this country I tell you. Letting the youth today run around with no discipline – it's a disgrace. This is what happens when you go easy on your troublemakers. It's a damn shame we had to wait for these foreigners to push us into action,” replied Mr. Mossback, who seemed to be getting really stirred up.

“But what about the innocent wizards and witches caught in the middle? Or the unfortunate muggles, who just happened to wonder by at the wrong time?” asked Jill.

“You can't make an omelet with breaking a few eggs, Missy. War is Hell, you know. Your lot has no idea what sacrifice even means!” answered Mr. Mossback.

“Thank you, Mr. Mossback. Rita, as I scan the surroundings, evidence of collateral damage is readily apparent. Scores of buildings have been damaged or destroyed,” said

Jill.

“Jill, I thought you said collateral damage was used to describe civilian casualties?” asked Rita.

“Well Rita, the Ministry uses the term to describe any harm to non-military items or personnel. That way it is easier to forget the damage done to the civilians. Oh, er, excuse me Rita, I meant to say easier to *report* the damage done,” said Jill apologetically.

“Well, it certainly makes it easier for me to say, Jill,” add Rita.

“We are going to try to get in a little closer –” Jill was saying until interrupted.

“Excuse me Miss. C-could you help me please?” asked an unknown woman's voice. She sounded very distraught.

“Of course. I'm Jill Jordonpour, a reporter with WWN. How can we help?”

“It's my husband, Georgie. I haven't seen him since the fighting started. H-he's not a Death Eater or an auror, just a clerk at St Mungo's,” said Georgie's wife with her voice breaking. A young girl could be heard crying in the background.

“Do you think he got caught up in the fighting?” asked Jill.

“I don't know, b-but I have a horrible feeling – why would anyone hex a clerk at a hospital? He wasn't a threat. H-here's a picture of him. If you see him Miss, please tell him his wife and daughter love him and want him to come home,” said the woman who was starting to cry.

“Is daddy here?” asked the young girl.

“No dear, let's go home and wait for him.”

“I wanna see daddy!” screamed the girl and then she began crying loudly.

“C'mon baby, we'll see him soon,” said the woman in a despairing voice.

The wireless was silent for a few seconds.

“Jill, are you there, dear?” asked Rita in an annoying cheerful voice.

There was a sniff. “R-rita,” then another sad sniff was heard. “That's all from

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Godric's H-hollow,” said Jill with her voice too now breaking. For a few seconds Harry thought he could hear Jill and her assistant crying over the air.

“Rita, say something!” said Rita's assistant.

“Um, welcome back to the Atrium in the Ministry of Magic, where Cornelius Fudge, the Minister himself, today announced the dissolution of the Committee Against Dark Sorcerers. This announcement triggered skirmishes across Britain that continue to rage. But as a WWN listener, you'll have the best seat in the country as we bring you all the action, all night.

“Speaking of action, my esteemed colleague from Chicago, Jane Flat-Chest, experienced some of the fighting first hand, as she was hexed by one of the combatants. Share your story with us, would you, Jane?” asked Rita in an disgustingly fake sweet voice.

“For the last time Rita, it's pronounced FLACHET!” growled Jane.

“Oh, sorry about that, dear. Slip of the tongue,” replied Rita.

“Whatever,” said Jane crossly. “The French witch I mentioned earlier, hexed both David and I, knocking us back forty or so feet. While we were tumbling Mars and the red headed wizard conjured something that fell from the sky and just pummeled Graveyard Corner into dust. It was very loud and we could feel the explosions, but thanks to the hex we didn't see anything.”

“Jane, if the French witch hadn't knocked us backwards I think we would have been dust along with the building,” said a voice Harry assumed was David's.

“That could be true,” said Jane. “All of the combatants left after the building was pulverized, so we are here alone.”

“Well, we are just glad that you are okay, Jane. Nothing is more important to us at WWN than the safety of our fellow workers, citizens and civil servants. Which is why I'd like to remind our audience before we go out to Victor in north London, that this portion

of the war against dark wizards is sponsored by Fizzing Whizzbies, the original floating sherbet balls,” said Rita.

“Oh I've had enough,” said Hermione in disgust. “They're every bit as bad as muggle news announcers. I'm going to bed.”

Harry, Ron, Ginny, Mary, Dean and Mark all nodded and also stood up. Most of the other Gryffindors watched them with confused looks. Harry said goodnight and walked over to the boys' staircase. He was very thankful again for his Occlumency lessons, he doubted he could have slept otherwise.

When Harry awoke the next morning, he was surprised to see that Neville and Seamus were already out of bed. He woke Ron, and they went down to the Common Room to meet the girls for breakfast. The boys were shocked to find most of the Gryffindors already in the Common Room gathered around the wizard's wireless.

“Have you lot been out here all night?” asked Ron.

Many of the Gryffindors nodded or said yes. Harry and Ron glared at the others. Ginny and Hermione then entered the Common Room.

“Well, we have to keep up with the breaking news,” said Neville to Ron.

“Has anything happened then?” asked Hermione.

Neville shook his head.

“Then what have you been listening too all night?” demanded Ron..

“Loads of interviews,” answered Natalie MacDonald.

This got Harry's attention. “Who have the reporters been talking to? Defenders? Aurors? Mars?” asked Harry eagerly.

“Well, mostly the reporters have been talking to each other,” explained Neville.

“That's suppose to be newsworthy?” asked Harry incredulously. “Rita Skeeter and Jane Flat-Chest getting all catty?”

Neville shrugged and turned his attention back to the wireless.

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“C'mon, lets eat,” suggested Hermione.

The others agreed and the four opened the painting to leave for the Great Hall. Once outside of Gryffindor Tower, they were immediately greeted by Steele.

“Good morning, Gryffindors. Can I join you for breakfast?” Steele said brightly.

“Of course,” answered Ginny.

As they walked down a staircase, Harry asked Steele, “Were you up all night in front of our tower?”

“No no, Harry. I maybe Angel's half-sister, but I am not him. I still need to sleep,” she answered.

“Meaning that Mars doesn't need to?” asked Hermione.

“It's not that he doesn't need to honey, it's that he can't,” said Steele as they reached the Gryffindor table.

The five of them sat down and started gathering food on their plates. After they began eating, Hermione spoke to Steele. “Why can't he sleep?”

Steele looked confused at the question. “Angel told me that you four were very close to him. Do y'all really not know about his condition?”

Hermione, Ron and Harry all shook their heads but Ginny spoke up.

“I knew that he hadn't slept for the past six years.”

“Six years?” gasped Hermione.

“How come he only told you Ginny?” asked Ron.

“I asked him. One Sunday night he was up all night training me and Luna. Hermione then told me that he was with her and Padma Monday night and I noticed on Wednesday that you two looked dead tired, so I knew he had been up with you Tuesday. Three solid days without sleep and he didn't look tired at all. I asked him how he managed.”

“What did he say?” asked Hermione.

“He said a Malsumis spirit cursed him six years ago and afterward he could never sleep again,” said Ginny.

“Is that all he said of it, Ginny?” asked Steele.

Ginny nodded.

“Modesty does not suit him,” said Steele shaking her head.

“I don't understand,” said Ginny.

“Describing the suffering he has endured, as merely a curse is a massive understatement. Describing Pillan, as just another Malsumis spirit is criminally deceptive. Angel's defeat of Pillan is the greatest achievement in history. For this act Angel is famous in the West and revered in the South – naming your son or daughter Angel or Angela after him is common there,” explained Steele.

Harry thought her eyes seemed to warm up as she spoke of her cousin.

“Can you tell us about Pillan?” as Hermione carefully.

“Pillan, is the greatest of the Malsumis spirits. About every a hundred and fifty years he appears and ravages the South. His presence stirs up hatred in men and war always breaks out where he roams. Storms, earthquakes and volcanoes are left in his wake. Crops fail, herd animals develop disease and then famine follows. A brigade of lesser Malsumis spirits follow along with him to enjoy the suffering of muggles and wizardkind alike,” explained Steele.

“This Pillan sounded worse than anything imaginable,” thought Harry.

“And Mars killed this thing?” asked Ron.

“Killed? Oh no darlin', you can't kill something like Pillan. He was just turned away early. Normally Pillan stays for five to seven years, sometimes as long as eleven, but Angel dispatched him after only a month,” answered Steele.

“And no one had ever managed that before?” asked Hermione.

“Never. Once about 900 years ago Pillan's reign of terror ended after only ten

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months, but no one knows why. When this last manifestation started, the seven greatest Spirit Defenders were assembled to try and force Pillan away. All but one of these were great leaders of the Defenders and used to being in charge. Angel was already making a reputation for himself so they accepted him grudgingly as the leader.

“They tracked Pillan and his brigade to a mountain in Southern Chile, Cerro Hudson. When the Defenders started their ascent the brigades of Pillan set upon them. They were well experienced in fighting Malsumis spirits and after a day of battle they had dispatched them with only one casualty: one of the witches was knocked off the side of the mountain and into a ravine. She was understandably left for dead as they pressed on up the mountain. However, while she was injured and unconscious, she stilled lived.

“The next day they met Pillan at the summit of Hudson and attacked. At first they seemed to be winning. While Pillan's prowess in battle is legendary, he had never before been attacked by such an organized and powerful group. However, there was to be no quick victory. Pillan made the mountain erupt underneath them with lava and ash shooting high into the air. Four of the defenders were instantly killed and another mortally wounded. He died within hours.”

“That left just Mars and one defender?” asked Harry who now noticed that several other students had gathered around their group listening to Steele's tale. Luna was standing right beside Steele, almost leaning on her.

“Yes, Harry, just Angel and a witch named Fiona Firebrand were still fighting. Fiona was greatly gifted in fire magics, so she could survive the heat and lava. The remaining two fought Pillan for an entire week without any chance for rest. Several more times the volcano erupted, which caused horrible destruction to the surrounding countryside.

“Finally on the seventh day, Angel decided that Pillan had been weakened enough to try a Dismissal Charm. When the spell was cast, a battle of then wills began. Fiona

could not help Angel with the casting of the spell, but she did her best to distract Pillan. After several hours of mental jousting, Pillan finally gave in, but just before he was forced away, he cursed both the Defenders.

“Fiona was driven insane and to this day the poor dear is totally incoherent. Angel warded off the insanity but a special curse was set upon him. Pillan cried as he vanished, 'From you I shall steal the gift of Evaki. Your only peace now abandons you for all time.' Pillan, you see, learned much about Angel during their battle of wills and knew exactly how to hurt him the most,” finished Steele sadly.

“Gift of Evaki? What's that?” asked Hermione.

“Sleep. The only respite my dear Angel had from his visions was when he slept. Most seers are actually at their most transcendental when they sleep. Their dreams show them many mystical things, but for Angel it was a time of rest and renewal that was now gone forever. As Pillan said, he shall never know peace again,” answered Steele.

“That's horrible,” said Ginny whose eyes were sprinkling with tears.

“How about the witch in the ravine? Did she live? Did she go insane too?” asked Harry.

“She lives and while I've had a few people call me insane, they never say it to my face,” said Steele smiling, but her eyes had gone cold again.

“You?” gasped the crowd around her in unison.

“Yes, me. If my Angel is in a fight I will be at his side. Unless of course he orders me not to be,” Steele said irritably.

“How long were you in the Ravine?” asked Ron.

“We can discuss that later Ron. Y'all need to start eating your breakfast – it's the most important meal of the day you know?” said Steele as she stood. “I have to speak with your Headmaster now.”

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Chapter Twenty-Seven – Dumbledore's Defeat



Harry spent Sunday morning doing a little homework and listening to the news on the wizard's wireless. While he was glad to be kept up to date on the war, the sensationalism WWN attached to its coverage made him sick. To Harry, it seemed they were treating the war like a combination of a sporting event and a soap opera.

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“Everyone, come quick! To the front lawn! They're leaving, most of them are leaving,” Colin Creevy yelled, holding the painting of the Fat Lady open.

“Who's leaving?” asked Katie Bell.

“C'mon, then!” Colin said impatiently; he turned around and left the doorway.

All the Gryffindors in the Common Room got up and followed Colin. He led them down the stairs, to the Entrance Hall and then out through the giant oak front doors and onto the steps that led to the front lawn. Hogwarts carriages, drawn by thestrals, were drawn up on the lawn. Most of the Slytherin students appeared to be lining up with their luggage. Harry also saw many adults standing about the lawn whom he knew must be parents of the Slytherins.

“Oh my,” said Hermione. “Why are they leaving, Colin?”

Before Colin could answer, a icy drawling voice came from behind them.

“Even a mudblood like yourself, Granger, should be smart enough to realize we're not going to let that murderer, Mars, teach us anymore,” spat Draco Malfoy venomously. Behind Malfoy were Crabbe and Goyle; all three stopped near Harry and his friends.

Harry scowled at Malfoy. “He gave you your chance, Malfoy. Mars warned you.”

Malfoy looked livid. Harry had never seen him so angry, yet Draco didn't go for his wand. In a cold whisper, Malfoy replied, “I'll kill you myself, Potter. You and your mudblood and muggle-loving friends.”

“Try it, Malfoy,” said Harry, barely moving his lips. He put his hand on his wand.

Malfoy looked around, saw the teachers nearby, and took a step closer to Harry. “The next time we meet, Potter, you'll be begging me to kill you to end your suffering.” Malfoy and his flunkies stomped off to the carriages.

Anger burned through Harry's veins. He knew Malfoy was leaving to join the ranks of the Death Eaters, and that he should curse him now before Malfoy got away. Harry also knew that without proof, he would only get arrested; with great difficulty, he moved

his hand away from his wand.

“NO! Please don't go!” shrieked a girl's voice behind them.

Harry turned and saw Heather Parkinson tugging on her older sister Pansy's robes as hard as she could as Pansy walked coolly down the Entrance Hall. Heather's face was red and streaked with tears.

“Stop! Pansy, please,” pleaded the weeping first year. “If you go, I'm afraid I'll never see you again,”

Pansy stopped walking, turned, and slapped her much smaller sister hard on the face. The force of the blow knocked Heather to the floor. “Good!” spat Pansy. “Why would I ever want to see a worthless little git like you again?”

Pansy turned away as Heather answered her. “Because I'm your sister and I love you!” she wailed. “A lot more than him! Why do you let Draco treat you that way?” Heather broke down completely. Harry saw a red welt rising where she had been struck. Her last plea, however, seemed to have struck a nerve with her sister. Pansy's look slowly faded from hateful to fearful as she glanced at the coaches and then at her sobbing little sister. Pansy took a step toward Heather, but stopped at a shout from the front lawn.

“Pansy! What are you doing up there? Hurry up, you fool!” shrieked Malfoy.

Pansy turned back to the carriages. “Right!” she said. She turned her nose up and walked toward the steps again.

Harry fought the urge to hex Pansy. Something flashed by his left side. Hermione was drawing her wand. Before she could level it, Ginny and Ron each seized one of her arms.

“No, Hermione. All the teachers are here,” urged Ron as he and Ginny pulled her away from Pansy.

“You miserable hag, you!” Hermione screamed at Pansy. “How can you treat someone who loves you like that?” Hermione let out a string of invectives Harry had

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never heard her use before as she struggled to reach the elder Parkinson. Ron and Ginny had a difficult time restraining her.

Pansy ignored the insults and walked to the carriage that held Draco, Goyle and Crabbe.

Harry's inner voice urged him, "One of your students needs you!" He left the Weasleys wrestling with Hermione and ran over to the sobbing Heather. He knelt down and lifted her shoulders off the floor. When she saw it was Harry, she threw her arms about his neck and sobbed on his shoulder.

"Harry ... how .. could ... she ... leave ... with ... him?" Heather said, gasping between words. Harry had no idea what to say so he just held her tight.

A few moments later, Ron, Hermione and Ginny joined him; Ron offered poor Heather a handkerchief. She took the handkerchief, let go of Harry and blew her nose a few times. She had stopped sobbing, but tears still ran down her face. The mark of Pansy's hand was growing more clear and red by the second.

"Harry, you've got to stop her leaving. Mars told us both that she had some good still in her. Stop her, please," begged Heather desperately.

"But she's seventeen, Heather. She's of age; I can't stop her doing what she wants. I'm so sorry," said Harry, dejected.

"I'll never see my sister again!" wailed Heather, sobbing anew on Harry's shoulder.

Rage built up inside Harry. Yet another family devastated by Voldemort and a Malfoy! At the same time, sadness engulfed him. Heather's grief aroused great sympathy in Harry, but it also shamed him. Pansy Parkinson was easily as unlikable as his three muggle relatives – probably more so – and Harry would gladly have paid any amount of galleons never to see his muggle family again. Heather, on the other hand, was totally despondent that her sister, who had just struck her and insulted her, was walking out of her life. How full of love must this young girl be?

“What's wrong, Heather?” they heard Mark Evans' voice.

Heather let go of Harry and ran to Mark, clinging to him as she had to Harry. Mary Sue Sladen now approached them. “Did her sister leave with Malfoy then?” asked Mary.

When Harry didn't answer, Ginny said, “Yes, she did.”

Mary sighed sadly. “C'mere, Heather,” she said gently.

Heather let go of Mark and put her arm around Mary.

“She's going to need hot chocolate, lots of it,” advised Mary, “and a place where she won't be bothered for a while. Mark, nick a tray of mugs from the house elves, would you? Then meet me by the statue of the Hufflepuff badger. There's a place near there very few people know about.” Mary looked up at Hermione.

Hermione flinched at the mention of the Hufflepuff statue. She glared down at Mary as Mark left for the kitchens, but the first year didn't waver. After a few seconds Mary gave Ginny the same confident look and led the still crying Heather away.

After the girls had left, Hermione said, in a tone of annoyance and admiration, “She's one cocky first year, isn't she?”

Ginny nodded. “Too right she is.”

Ron and Harry traded confused looks. “Should we even bother to ask what you two are on about?” asked Ron.

Both girls said bluntly, “No.”

“Let's go to lunch, then,” suggested Ron; and so they did.

As Harry lay in bed that night, he mulled over a reality that he would never have believed could happen. Draco Malfoy and his two flunkies had quit Hogwarts, along with a number of the students Harry most disliked. Rather than ending the day in celebration, however, because of Heather's grief, he would remember this day as one of his saddest days ever at Hogwarts.

Monday morning, as they walked down the corridor towards Defense Against the

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Dark Arts, Hermione asked, “Do you think Mars is back at Hogwarts?”

“Not from the sound of the news. They reported seeing Charlie and him in London this morning,” answered Ginny.

“Then who's going to teach today?” asked Ron.

“As long as it's not Snape, I don't care,” said Harry, opening the door to the classroom. He looked inside nervously, afraid that his own gloomy prediction might prove true. There was no Snape at the front of the class; in fact, there was no teacher at all. A few students were already seated, so Harry, Ron and Hermione sat in the back, while Ginny took a seat up front near Luna and Katie Bell. Soon the whole class was seated, but still there was no instructor.

Harry was just about to suggest they split up and go over their last lessons when the door to the classroom opened and Steele entered.

“Good morning, class. My name is Steele Saunders, and I'll be substituting for a few days. Today's lesson is for the entire class, and will be taught outside, so please follow me,” said Steele, holding the classroom door open.

Harry immediately stood up in relief. He was the first to reach Steele, who smiled at him as he went into the hall. Within seconds he was joined by the rest of the class. “It's such a beautiful day that I just couldn't resist an outside lesson,” said Steele as they walked.

“Er, Professor Saunders. Is Mars okay? Some of us are really worried,” said Dean Thomas. Many in the class nodded in agreement.

“He's doing just fine, and will be back as soon as he can. You needn't worry about him; Angel can take care of himself, darlin',” answered Steele.

“Angel?” Some of the students looked confused. Ginny and Luna took turns explaining the source of this nickname. Hermione leaned close to Ron and Harry and whispered, “Another member of his fan club. She might even be president.”

“What do you mean?” whispered Harry. Steele chose that moment to look back at them, so Hermione didn't answer.

The class stopped at the large beech tree by the lake where Harry, Hermione, and Ron often rested on nice days like this. Steele turned and smiled at the students. Harry saw that her eyes, as usual, did not match her warm smile. However, this time he didn't think that they were cold so much as empty – like something was missing from her. He suddenly felt a surge of sympathy for her, but he had no idea why.

“There are many bits of advice when it comes to Defense Against the Dark Arts. For example, Mad Eye Moody's preaching of 'Constant Vigilance' is one,” said Steele, in a surprisingly good imitation of the retired auror's voice. “Some others are, 'The best defense is a good offense,' 'Always take the high ground,' and 'Don't jinx'em until you see the whites of their eyes.' But none of these address what to do if you are hopelessly outnumbered and surrounded.

“The problem is that witches and wizards these days are just too used to being able to apparate away from any tricky situation. There are, however, many times when this will not be practical, so today and Friday we will cover alternative escape methods.

“The first way is useful when your escape route has to be very precise to avoid detection, or has dangerous obstacles. It is, however, best used when you are not currently under surveillance or enemy fire.

“Any volunteers for the demonstration?” asked Steele.

If Hermione still felt any ill-will toward the blond Defender, she hid it well as her hand shot straight into the air.

“Thank you, Hermione. Please come forward.”

Hermione approached Steele and stood next to her. Steele tapped Hermione with her wand and said, “Araneus Scando!” Hermione twitched a bit, as if something was prickling her spine.

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“Okay, Hermione, now climb the tree—up to that branch—just as if you were a spider,” said Steele, pointing to a large branch about twenty-five feet up. “You must concentrate on which hand or knee is sticking, and which is not. It takes a while to get the gist of it, but once you understand, it's a very natural process.”

Hermione screwed up her face in concentration. She carefully put one hand, and then the opposite knee, on the huge tree trunk, and lifted herself off the ground. She had managed to climb about five feet when she must have forgotten which appendage to make stick. With a small shriek, she slid quickly down the tree. Steele caught Hermione easily before she hit the ground.

“That was much better than average for a first try, Hermione. Go ahead and start again. We can probably have five of you climb at a time,” said Steele.

Hermione started back up the tree, while Steele conjured a ring of soft foam on the ground surrounded the trunk. She called for more students to come forward and to try climbing. Soon, most of the students were enjoying the great view from the beech limb as the last of the climbers slowly made their way up. The quidditch players seemed to climb the fastest, followed closely by Hermione and Luna.

Once the entire class was on the limb, Steele called up to them. “Okay, who knows the quickest and safest way down?”

“Push Ernie and Neville off and then land on them,” suggested Zacharias Smith. The two stout boys glared at him as the students laughed.

Steele then called on Hermione, who said, “The feather fall charm should do it.”

“Very good, Hermione. Take five points for Gryffindor. Can you show the class?” asked Steele.

Hermione rolled up her sleeves and pointed her wand at her chest. She leaned forward and slipped off the branch. Instead of plummeting to the ground and a set of broken bones, she drifted gently down. She spun around a bit, and laughed as she landed.

“I’ve never tested the charm on that long a fall.” Hermione said breathlessly.

“Okay, now everyone watch me cast the charm, and then practice it some. When you’re ready, let me know and then you can hop off the limb. Don’t worry about your spell failing; Hermione and I will be here to cast it on you if needed,” Steele said, looking up the class.

About half of the class managed the spell on the first try, and neither Steele nor Hermione had any troubles saving those who failed. Once down, the students were instructed to climb the tree again, but this time casting the Spider Climb Charm on themselves. Within an hour all of the students had climbed the tree and floated down via their own spells several times. To the class’ delight, Steele dismissed them without any homework, and they all headed for the Castle.

“That was an excellent lesson,” said Hermione as they walked back.

“Must run in the family,” added Harry.

“She was Mars’ second student, after Bill,” commented Ginny.

“Really? Did he teach her the UAS?” Hermione asked with interest.

“And glyphs,” Ginny nodded. Hermione looked impressed.

Each night that week, Harry listened to about an hour of war coverage on WWN. He tried his best to tune out the worthless announcers and determine what was really going on. The fighting had really slowed down, and any reporting of skirmishes was always long after they had ended. Most of the talk was about a proposed meeting between Jonathon Simpson, a senior CADS officer, and Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, that would take place the day before the deadline the Minister had set for CADS to surrender.

“Do you think they can work out a deal?” asked Ron as he, Harry and Hermione approached the Potions classroom Thursday morning. “Could the Ministry and CADS really have peace and fight Voldemort together?”

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“No way,” answered Harry. “Dolohov controls the Committee Against Dark Sorcerers. You can't expect a group that's run by Death Eaters to fight against Death Eaters. That's insane.”

“But Dumbledore did say that he hadn't given up on that Lennon woman, Harry. Maybe the fighting so far has weakened Dolohov's faction enough for CADS to kick out the Death Eaters?” suggested Hermione as they sat down in the back of the classroom.

“Don't hold your breath,” said Harry grimly.

Sally-Anne Perkins and Blaise Zabini were the only two Slytherins left in the class. Even having the two girls flash him friendly smiles could not keep Harry from feeling depressed: the sight of Pansy's empty seat reminded Harry forcibly of Heather's despair.

Twenty minutes into the day's lesson on the Universal Solvent, the students looked up in mild surprise at a knock on the classroom's door. Very few at Hogwarts were brave enough to interrupt Snape's class.

“Come in,” said Snape in disgust, glaring at the door. The door opened and Steele took a step inside.

“I'm sorry to interrupt your class, Professor – ,” she began.

“Then don't,” snapped Snape.

The students' eyes shifted back and forth between Steele and Snape like a tennis match.

“Ugly and unoriginal,” said Steele. “Well, at least your personality matches your hairstyle.” A smattering of giggles from the class was quickly stifled at a sharp look from Snape.

“Is there a reason you're disrupting my class?” sneered Snape.

“Yes,” answered Steele. She turned away from him and looked at Harry. “Ron, Hermione, Harry. Pack your bags and come with me. Quickly, now.”

Harry and Ron didn't need to be told twice to leave Snape's class early; they

readied their things immediately. Hermione hesitated and then also prepared to leave. Harry didn't quite dare to peek at Snape, but as he left the class, he could feel the Potion Master's stare boring into his back. In the corridor, Harry saw Ginny standing next to Steele.

“What's going on, Ginny?” asked Ron.

“Charlie's been seriously hurt,” said Ginny, putting her arms around her brother.

Harry and Hermione both inhaled sharply. Before Harry could ask what had happened, Steele spoke. “No questions yet – just follow me,” she said stiffly.

They followed the Defender up to the hospital. Charlie was laid up in one of the beds and looked in a bad state. He was heavily bandaged; only one eye was visible, and one of his legs was elevated. Many odd things were attached to different parts of his body, and a load of potion bottles were lined up on a table next to him.

Ginny and Ron exclaimed, “Charlie!” and ran up to him.

Charlie managed an arduous smile at his youngest siblings. “Are you l-lot skiving off cl-classes? Sally, I expected you to keep a cl-closer eye on them.” Charlie winced in pain with each word.

“It's only Snape's class that they're missing,” answered Steele.

“Well, I s-suppose any excuse to miss that git's class is justified, eh Sally?” said Charlie, attempting another painful grin.

“I've told you many times to call me Steele.”

“I just thought that while on my d-deathbed you might allow me the liberty to call you Sally?” asked Charlie.

Hermione and Ginny both shrieked, “Deathbed?” Ron swore.

“That's not funny, Charlie,” said Steele. “Look how much you scared them. Now, stop saying that!”

“Then let me call you Sally,” said Charlie, whose face managed to glow through

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his bandages.

“Fine. Sally, then,” said Steele irritably.

“What happened to you?” demanded Ginny, reaching out to grab Charlie's hand. Before she could, however, Madam Pomfrey entered the room, saw Harry and Hermione on the near side of the bed, and shrieked at them.

“What are you two doing here? Charlie's still recovering; he needs rest! Get out of here at once.”

Harry and Hermione jumped and backed away guiltily. The nurse then saw Steele, Ron, and Ginny on the other side of the bed, and her demeanor softened. “Family,” she said sadly.

“Yes, Poppy. They've only just found out,” Steele said to her.

Harry thought Steele's eyes looked different now—almost happy. Anger flared up in him – how could she be happy at such a moment? As he stared deeper into her eyes, however, he realized that they actually weren't happy, just no longer empty. They now looked full of caring and sympathy. He glanced over at Ginny and Ron, and saw that their eyes looked the same: there seemed to be no pupil or color, just emotions jumping out at him. Harry closed his eyes and shook his head. When he reopened them everyone's eyes appeared normal again. Ginny's brown eyes were sprinkled with tears as she held Charlie's hand. “Am I cracking up?” Harry thought to himself.

“I suppose you can stay for a while, but don't make him speak,” said Madam Pomfrey. “He's very weak.” She gave Charlie two spoonfuls of some liquid and left the room.

“What happened to you?” Ginny asked tenderly.

Charlie's one visible eye was now glassy. It turned to his sister and looked very unfocused.

“Poppy was right, Ginny. I-I can't r-really talk now. Ask Sally – she knows,” said

Charlie. His eye closed.

The four teenagers looked at Steele expectantly. She motioned for them to follow her to the other side of the ward, where they all sat as Steele spoke. “Charlie was with Fleur and a Defender named Boleslaw Lemsky. They were on a mission to intercept foreign dignitaries from the Baltic areas. The foreigners were coming to Britain to hear Voldemort's pitch on why they should ally with him.

“When the three arrived at the meeting place, around seven foreigners were speaking with two Death Eaters. Boleslaw must have recognized the two Polish wizards, because he said their names and then flew into a rage. The Poles, you see, have had very few wizards ever go to the Dark Side, and I'm sure he took it as an insult to his people to see such traitors.

“Boleslaw's curse killed or incapacitated five of the visitors, and the other two disappeared immediately. The Death Eaters both fired off curses, but Charlie and Fleur blocked them, and then Charlie stunned the female Death Eater. The dark wizard retreated into a doorway. The three Alliance members followed him into the room, but the Death Eater was not alone – Voldemort was with him.”

The teenagers flinched.

“Boleslaw is reckless, even for a Defender. He immediately charged them, curses a-blazing. He managed to hit the Death Eater, but Voldemort easily countered his jinx and then blasted him with a spell that Charlie didn't recognize. Boleslaw was blown to bits, and even the tiny portion of the curse that hit Charlie left him in this condition.

“Voldemort was about to finish Charlie off when Fleur attacked. She managed to knock Voldemort down with a stunner, but he recovered instantly. She somehow dodged spell after spell, and led Voldemort away from Charlie. Charlie had just enough strength to call to the other Alliance members for help. Tonks and Henri apparated there a minute later, and brought Charlie here.”

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“Why here instead of St Mungo's?” asked Ron.

“Several of our people have died under mysterious circumstances at that hospital. Angel thinks that there are Death Eater spies within its staff, so he ordered Charlie to be taken here,” answered Steele.

“Is Fleur okay?” asked Ginny apprehensively.

“No one has seen her in two days, sweetie,” said Steele. “We are extremely worried.”

Ginny's face crumpled; she grabbed hold of Harry with both arms.

“I should have been with him!” said Steele forcefully as she gazed at Charlie. “I would have taken Voldemort more seriously, and been more cautious. When Angel warns us to be wary, I know to listen, unlike Boleslaw. Angel gave strict orders that we were only to approach Voldemort if Angel himself or Dumbledore was with us.”

“Dumbledore is helping you? I thought he was furious at Mars,” said Harry.

Steele nodded.

“Why did he change his mind?” asked Hermione.

“Perhaps unity was more important to him, Hermione? I can't say with any certainty. When dealing with great wizards like Angel and Dumbledore, it's best to take their words and actions at face value. The depth of their knowledge is so vast that it would be irrationally arrogant to pretend that you could understand their motivations. Either you agree with them or you don't – it's best kept simple,” answered Steele.

Harry found this reasoning sound, and apparently so did the Weasleys, as they were both nodding as well. Hermione, however, looked insulted and barely hid a frown.

“Is Professor Dumbledore with Mars, then?” asked Harry.

“No. That's another worry of ours. No one, not Angel nor anyone in the Order of the Phoenix, has seen him for two days,” said Steele.

“You don't think anything has happened to him, do you?” asked Ron, concerned.

“Unfortunately, we have only one bit of information, and its source is rather dubious. Several Death Eaters have been bragging to each other that one of them has captured him,” answered Steele.

“Captured Dumbledore? How can that be?” asked Hermione.

“I’ve told you all I know. I’ve not been allowed to leave this blasted castle since the Herbert murders; with the Headmaster now missing, Angel won’t even consider it,” said Steele bitterly.

“Is he worried that the Death Eaters will attack Hogwarts?” asked Harry.

Steele opened the door and motioned them to follow her out into the corridor. “No. Hogwarts has many defenses against outside attack. The entire Alliance and the Order of the Phoenix could be here before they breached the castle.”

“You’re guarding against an enemy from within, then?” asked Hermione.

The bell rang. Steele gave Hermione a quick nod and said, “I need to prepare for my seventh year class. I’ll see y’all tomorrow afternoon.” She left.

“Snape better watch himself,” said Ron as they headed to the courtyard for break. “Steele doesn’t seem to have Mars’ patience, and there’s no Dumbledore around to protect the slimy git.”

Harry and Ginny beamed at Ron, but Hermione crossed her arms and looked worried. They had just reached the courtyard they heard Professor McGonagall’s voice ring out.

“Potter, Weasley.”

They turned and looked at her. She seemed cross and very tense. “You four, follow me to my office,” she snapped.

In McGonagall’s office the teenagers sat down in front of her desk and stared at her across it. “I have some very grave news for you, I’m afraid. Your brother Charlie has been grievously injured,” said McGonagall.

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“We know, Professor. Steele just brought us to see him,” said Ginny.

McGonagall's head jerked a bit in surprise, but her expression reflected more confusion than surprise. Harry stared into her eyes and tried to gauge her emotions as he had earlier with Steele, but he saw nothing but white.

“I've also some bad news about Professor Dumbledore –” she continued.

“He's disappeared, we know. Steele told us that too,” interrupted Ginny.

McGonagall again froze, looking confused. After a pause, she asked, “Did she tell you anything else?”

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, but Harry cut her off. “No,” he said firmly.

McGonagall looked at him harshly. “Have any of you been in contact with Professor Dumbledore or Professor Mars?”

“No,” said Harry again.

“Have you?” asked Hermione.

McGonagall scowled at Hermione, but then her face changed again. It looked strained for a second, and then calm. “You lot can leave now,” she said.

The four got up and left immediately.

“What was she on about?” demanded Ron as they walked down the hall.

“Maybe she's worried, now that Mars and Dumbledore are gone, that Hogwarts isn't safe?” suggested Ginny.

“She certainly looked worried about something,” said Hermione.

Harry wanted to comment to his friends on her emotionless eyes, but he had no idea how to explain what he had seen. He didn't really understand it himself; so he remained silent.

Friday, Saturday and Sunday were tense days for Harry. The whole school remained on edge. Everyone was talking about Dumbledore's absence, and wondering

why Mars had not returned. There had been no more skirmishes reported, and no sightings of the red wizard.

On Friday, Harry had a long talk with Heather Parkinson after teaching his Defense Against the Dark Arts class. While she was no longer crying over her sister's leaving, the zest for life that normally dominated Heather's personality was missing.

In the last class of the week, Steele taught them the jumping charm. When properly cast, it allowed you to jump around twenty feet high and forty feet away. As with her first lesson, the class was: held outside, about escaping dangerous situations, and a lot of fun.

That Saturday evening was the deadline Minister Fudge had set for Jo Anne Lennon and the officers of CADS to surrender. The ongoing talks between Simpson and Mrs. Bones went right up to the final hour. At the end of that time, the two emerged and declared triumphantly that a one-month ceasefire had been agreed upon, during which they would begin negotiating a permanent truce.

The crowd at the Atrium cheered at this announcement, and the WWN announcers and spot reporters hailed the news. Harry, however, was distinctly not jubilant. A permanent truce with Death Eaters? Who were they kidding?

Neither Mars nor Dumbledore had returned to the school when classes began after the weekend. Steele taught Defense Against the Dark Arts for the second straight week, and spent both Monday and Friday helping the students prepare for the end of year exams. The other teachers, including Harry, also prepped their classes for the exams. While the mood was still tense, it was also boring, and the week seemed to drag much longer than Harry thought it should. He and Ron were both relieved when Steele dismissed them from class that Friday afternoon.

At dinner Friday night, an announcement was made that Harry had known was coming, but the forewarning didn't make it any easier to take. Slytherin was in the lead for the Quidditch Cup, but their entire team had left the school on the previous Sunday. It had

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therefore been decided to cancel the competition for the year.

As captain of the Gryffindor team, Ron took the news the hardest. His complaints, however, stopped when they returned to the Gryffindor Common Room and heard on WWN that the battles between the Death Eaters and the Alliance had renewed – apparently the cease-fire was limited to the Committee. There were many detailed reports about the dead and the wounded. Suddenly, who won the Quidditch Cup didn't mean so much anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Eight – Tests and Unrest



Sunday morning after breakfast, Harry, Ginny, Hermione, and Ron went to visit Charlie again. His condition had worsened over the past week. He was unconscious, and even more Healer equipment had been attached to him. When Ginny asked Madam Pomfrey how he was doing, the nurse looked sad and pale.

“His chances of survival aren't good, my dear. His internal injuries were extensive, and part of the curse seems to be lingering and fighting the healing magic,” she replied.

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Tears streamed down Ginny's face. Madam Pomfrey put an arm around her and opened her mouth to say something when the door opened. Harry turned and saw Mars in the doorway. Before he had gone off to war, the Texan had looked a bit tired, but he now appeared about on the brink of fainting from exhaustion. His skin was yellow and his eyes were bloodshot and sullen; his left hand shook slightly, and his steps were tentative. The sight of Mars looking so enfeebled so startled Harry that he could only stare as his teacher approached.

“Oh, Poppy. Charlie doesn't look well at all,” said Mars, oblivious to the silent gawking stares of the four teenagers.

“Mars. What on earth happened to you? You need to lie down immediately,” the nurse replied anxiously.

“There's no need to concern yourself with me, Poppy. A few days of R&R and I'll be fine,” said Mars.

For a split second, Harry had a powerful feeling that Mars was covering something up and that he was really struggling to even remain standing. His body seemed to be crying out for respite from some torment or curse – as though he were in the midst of a death struggle at this very moment. Mars glanced at Harry and suddenly his aura changed to one of vitality and health. Harry closed his eyes and shook his head. When he opened them Mars just looked normal--his strange insights were gone.

Mars reached into his robes and pulled out a beaker filled with a glowing liquid of the most beautiful shade of blue that Harry had ever seen. The four teenagers and the nurse all fixed their eyes upon it.

“Mars. Is that what I think it is? The Elixir of Life?” asked Madam Pomfrey.

“Yes, it is. Sally told me how bad off Charlie was, so I picked this up,” answered Mars.

“Picked it up?” asked Hermione. “Have you created your own Philosopher's

Stone?”

“Don't be silly, darlin',” Mars smiled.

“Picked it up?” echoed Madam Pomfrey incredulously. “There's only one place that you could've taken this from!”

“Of course, Poppy. St Mungo's had the last vial that Nicholas Flamel gave them before he died,” said Mars.

“But – but it was agreed—it was decided that no individual, no matter who they were, would be given the elixir unless their living would spare others,” argued the nurse.

“I was not in the country when this decision was made, and I am not bound by it.”

“But that potion is irreplaceable!”

“So is Charlie! Poppy, you're much more talented at healing than I, but if you refuse to help him with this elixir, I'll administer it myself,” replied Mars.

Madam Pomfrey thought deeply for a few seconds and then spoke. “Give me the elixir, Mars. I'll be back in a few moments.”

Mars held out a shaking hand with the glowing potion. Madam Pomfrey looked at him with concern as she took the potion and then left the room.

“Will Charlie be okay now?” asked Ron.

“Yes, Ron. The restorative powers of that elixir are unrivaled,” answered Mars.

“You look as if you could use the elixir yourself, Mars. Madam Pomfrey is right, you know. You should really lie down and let her take a look at you,” Hermione said firmly.

Mars looked amused as he gazed down at Hermione. “Ah, the ancient art of nagging. Between you, Sally, and Fleur I believe y'all have every aspect of it mastered.”

Hermione put her hands on her hips and glared up at him. “Sarcasm won't make you any better.”

“I'm not ill or hurt, Hermione. Your concern is unnecessary. I'm just tired.”

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“She's got a point, Mars, you really do look really awful,” said Ron.

“Now you too?” said Mars and then he sighed heavily. “Look, I know that y'all are concerned because you care, but I had to threaten to jinx Fleur this morning before she would stop nagging me to go see a healer. I'm just tired of hearing it.”

“You were with Fleur? That means she's okay then?” asked Ginny hopefully.

“Yes, Ginny, she's fine. After she lured Riddle far enough away from Charlie, she disappeared and escaped. She's quite the dueler, very fast on her feet. We shouldn't be too surprised, though; Olympe told me that Fleur was the best student she had ever had at BeauxBatons. Very high praise indeed,” commented Mars.

“What about Dumbledore?” asked Harry earnestly.

“His story is more complex. Let's talk about that later, okay? I'm just not up to it right now,” said Mars. He bid them goodbye and left.

“He looked like he was going to keel over right there,” said Ginny as they headed back to the Gryffindor Common Room.

“Yes, I know. Did you see how he balled up his fists every so often? It seems like he's fighting off some kind of curse or something,” added Hermione.

The next Monday Harry, Ginny, Hermione, and Ron rushed through breakfast in order to get to Defense Against the Dark Arts early. When they entered the classroom, they found Mars, still looking on the point of collapse, seated at his desk.

“I had a feeling I'd see you four a bit early this morning,” said Mars with a painful grin. “Have y'all heard about Charlie?”

“No,” they shook their heads.

“He's feeling so much better that he's already left the hospital.”

“Really?” Harry, Ginny, and Hermione cried together.

“That's great,” Ron said with relief.

“In fact,” Mars continued, “he told me he's better than ever. Remember the scars

from the the burns he got from that Romanian Rednose on his right arm and side?”

“Yes,” Ron said. Ginny nodded.

“Well, there's no trace of them anymore. He told me even the pain in his knee from an old bludger injury is gone. That elixir is just amazing.”

Ron, Ginny, and Harry looked happy and relieved, but Hermione's face showed mixed emotions. She frowned and spoke to Mars. “Mars, you shouldn't have stolen that potion.”

“So you'd rather see Charlie dead then?”

“Of course not!” answered Hermione, horrified. “How can you say something like that?”

“I didn't say it, Hermione, you did.”

Harry could understand Mars' irritation at Hermione's nagging, but he was surprised at Mars' antagonism. Mars seemed determined to provoke Hermione.

Hermione sputtered and said indignantly, “I said nothing of the sort! I'm talking about you breaking wizarding laws just because you can get away with it.” She looked very upset.

Mars did not glare at her angrily as Harry expected; instead, his face had the same look as when teaching a class. “That's real fresh coming from little Miss Extortionist.” Hermione started to object, but Mars spoke first. “Or do you expect me to believe that Rita Skeeter wrote that article in the Quibbler last year because of her good nature?”

Hermione looked stung, but she recovered quickly. “But the truth had to get out.”

“A fair point, but that wasn't your only felony. Not messing with time is a pretty important wizarding law, isn't it? How many years in Azkaban do you think you'd get for your misuse of a Time Turner? I'm not sure what number you'll come up with, Hermione, but you can probably add a few more decades to it, seeing as your abuse of the device set free the supposed most evil wizard in Britain.”

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Hermione stood in shocked silence, but Harry defended her. “Mars, they were going to kill Sirius! If we hadn't used the time turner, we couldn't have saved Buckbeak, and Sirius wouldn't have had a way to escape!”

“Harry, you did the right and the only thing in rescuing Sirius. It's Hermione that thinks you should let your friends die instead of breaking a law,” answered Mars.

Hermione slammed her fists onto the desk and shouted at Mars: “I NEVER SAID THAT! YOU'RE PUTTING WORDS INTO MY MOUTH!”

“I am not putting words into your mouth; I'm merely exposing the hypocrisy of your self-righteous defense of wizarding laws,” answered Mars calmly.

“That potion,” retorted Hermione, “was supposed to be used to save many people. Not just one, even if he is your best mate! What if one day there's a Healer who has just discovered something really important, say a cure that will save thousands of people, but he's dying. Without that potion, not only will the Healer die, but so will all the people who could have been cured. That's what they were saving it for!”

“I'm supposed to let Charlie die over 'what ifs'?” Mars shook his head. “Hermione, you'll have to do a lot better than that.”

“But Mars, you broke the law to benefit yourself, to the detriment of others. And innocent people have died in the battles you're fighting. What distinguishes that kind of behavior from the actions of Voldemort and his followers?” asked Hermione earnestly.

“Hermione!” snapped Ginny, shocked. Hermione ignored her and continued to stare at Mars.

“Morals, Hermione. In times like these, they're the only thing that can guide you. I know that innocents suffered during our skirmishes; they always get the worst in war. Their agony weighs heavily upon me, but it is a burden that must be borne. None of my choices are good – I *cannot* make this war antiseptic. War is the preeminent tragedy of civilization. The more we advance, the more things we have to fight over, and the better

we are at killing each other.

“At this moment in time, following the law has to be relegated to a lesser priority. The risk is too high otherwise. I ask you, what good would it do for me to avoid breaking any of the Ministry's laws if that very inaction allowed its downfall?” said Mars.

“But they just signed a cease fire with CADS. Isn't that a good sign?” asked Ron.

“No, it's a sign of the weakness of Fudge's position. The Committee's strength has grown far beyond the Ministry's. Fudge refused to declare war on CADS when I approached him, and he agreed to peace talks and a cease fire even though I threatened to never help him again if he did so. He's just too terrified of Jo Anne Lennon,” answered Mars.

“But I thought you controlled the Ministry?” said Hermione, then bit her lip as though she regretted her outburst.

“Now, I wonder who gave you that idea?” asked Mars. He and the others all stared at Hermione.

“You know very well who. You've had that Mary Sue girl spying on me, haven't you?” accused Hermione.

“Of course I know, but it wasn't because of Mary's curiosity. Do you seriously think that I'd have to resort to using a first year student to keep tabs on that Death Eater? Snape does nothing at Hogwarts without my knowing it,” replied Mars, with the first hint of anger in his voice.

“But you never said anything to me.”

“Hermione, I'm not about to object to your meeting with one of your professors. However, I will admit disappointment in finding that you still trust Snape's words over my own.”

Hermione looked hurt, but she screwed up her courage and objected, “But it was still morally wrong to take that potion. You know it was.”

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“Let's talk about what you know, Hermione. Do you know the future of St. Mungo's? Do you know for sure that it won't fall into the hands of CADS, and therefore Dolohov? Do you know how valuable that elixir could be to Tom Riddle?” asked Mars.

“The Death Eaters take over the hospital? Have you foreseen that?” asked Hermione.

“I see many things, Hermione, but visions of the future are not like watching a muggle television program. Most are foggy and difficult to glimpse. Many are interrelated, but the connecting thread is so hard to see that it usually isn't noticed until it's too late. The visions also change constantly. Small actions I take snowball into enormous events or even disasters. I see horrible future catastrophes, and I don't know if I did something to cause them, if I can stop them, or if they will ever really occur.

“With tremendous effort, there are times that I can draw a line through this infinity of possibilities and have some idea of what is likely to happen. One of these chains of events leads to Riddle getting his hands on the elixir. While he no longer needs it to restore himself, who knows what a brilliant mind like his could do with such a powerful potion?” said Mars.

This lengthy explanation reminded Harry of Steele's advice about taking the words of great wizards at face value. That approach not only kept things simple; it kept you safe from long-winded narratives.

Hermione had opened her mouth to speak further when the door opened and Dean, Seamus and the Patil twins entered the room. They all hailed Mars, but their happy faces quickly turned worried as they noticed his run-down appearance. The rest of the class started to file in, greeting Mars as they entered, so Harry and his friends took their seats.

Mars remained seated as he addressed the class. He thanked them for receiving Steele so well, and told the class that she had really enjoyed teaching them. He reminded the students that in the last weeks of classes, they would continue to revise for the

upcoming exams. Most of his time would be spent helping the fifth and seventh years preparing for their OWLs and NEWTs.

Mars had Ginny and Luna pass out parchments labeled with students' names. When Harry unrolled his, he found a revision schedule similar to the ones that Hermione made for him and Ron every year, except that this one only covered subjects related to Defense Against the Dark Arts. As he unrolled it further, he saw it also included instructions for testing the first year class that he taught himself.

When the bell rang, the students whispered excitedly amongst themselves as they exited the classroom. Harry guessed they were gossiping about the poor condition Mars was in. Hermione, Ron and Harry all approached Mars' desk, where he was speaking with Ginny and Luna. Harry wasn't sure if it was safe to ask about Professor Dumbledore with Luna around, but Ginny apparently didn't share his reservation; she spoke up as soon as the last of the other students had left the room.

“Has Dumbledore really been captured?” Ginny asked.

Mars turned his head wearily to face Ginny and said “Yes.”

“Is he okay? Oh, they aren't torturing him are they?” asked Hermione anxiously.

“Who did it?” asked Harry and Ron.

“They have not harmed him, nor will they will they be able to in the future,” said Mars.

“How's that?” asked Harry.

“The magic used in the trap prevents him from escaping, but it also prevents them from reaching him. He is completely isolated from our world, both invulnerable and unable to act,” explained Mars.

“But—but, how can you know this?” asked Hermione.

“There is nothing else that could prevent the Headmaster from communicating with me. I have not spoken with him since his disappearance,” answered Mars.

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“But couldn't that mean that he's dead?” asked Ron, turning white.

“No, Ron, he's not dead. When a great wizard dies, an incredible event always follows within a few days; Professor Dumbledore has been missing for almost two weeks,” said Mars.

“What do you mean, an incredible event?” asked Hermione.

“It's an ancient tradition of egoism. Once a witch or wizard becomes very powerful or very haughty, they often plan their Morsmiraculumni, the great event that is triggered upon their death. Because nothing of the sort happened after Harry first dispatched Voldemort, Professor Dumbledore and I knew Riddle wasn't dead. The great event is deeply personal, and varies as widely as wizards themselves. The witch or wizard must do all the research, preparation and casting themselves. Even giving another person a hint of what you're planning will ruin the spell. In fact, I'd guess that less than five percent of the Morsmiraculumni actually work – witches and wizards often have too high an opinion of themselves. The caster will never know if their event really succeeded—because, well, they aren't around when it's supposed to go off,” explained Mars.

“What kind of things happen?” asked Harry.

“With dark wizards, you have horrible plagues, raining frogs, a sudden typhoon or hurricane and such. They say that one really nasty Egyptian witch's caused an eclipse of the sun for three days, but I find that hard to believe. You know how—” Mars' face suddenly twitched painfully, cutting off his words. His hands balled into fists and the muscles on his neck clenched. After a few seconds, Mars relaxed a bit and continued.

“Of course, the Headmaster's would be nothing of the sort. Most likely it would be a breath-taking meteor shower, a spectacular comet, or even a purple halo around the moon. Now, that would stun the muggle astronomers, wouldn't it?”

Harry wanted to smile at his teacher's joviality, but he couldn't. Mars' health just looked too frail for him to be cracking jokes.

“If almost all them fail, how are you sure that Dumbledore's would definitely work?” asked Ron.

From Mars' expression, Harry thought Ron must have asked the dumbest question in history. Ron winced and averted his eyes.

“Professor Dumbledore is not only the greatest wizard of our time, Ronald Weasley, he is the greatest wizard ever. None of you truly understand how powerful,” said Mars, then paused and again strained his muscles. Again, he relaxed after a moment and finished, as though nothing had happened, “how powerful he really is.” He still looked annoyed by Ron's question.

“Have you –” Hermione began, but Mars cut her off.

“I'm sorry, Hermione, but I'm already behind schedule. Y'all should get going anyway.”

Hermione nodded at Mars; as they left, she shot Ron a rather nasty look. Once they were out in the hall she rounded on him.

“Well done, Ron!” she said sarcastically.

“What?”

“How could you ask such a stupid question? Now that he's mad I doubt we'll get any more information from him about Dumbledore's capture.”

Harry and Ginny rolled their eyes at each other. Both recognized the brewing of a new bickering match. They headed outside for break. Luna silently wandered away from the group in an apparently random direction.

“It was not stupid. Mars himself said that the Morsmira-whatever fails 95% of the time.”

“Dumbledore's hardly an average wizard, Ron.”

“Neither were the others that tried.”

“But you should have known questioning Dumbledore's power would upset him.

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You know how highly Mars thinks of him.”

“Mars is the mind reader, Hermione, not me.”

Ginny stepped bravely between the quarreling couple and put her hand on Hermione's shoulder. “What other information did you want from Mars, Hermione?”

Hermione glared at Ron for another second and then looked at Ginny. “I wanted to know who he thought had created the trap.”

“What does it matter who? If he's trapped he's trapped,” said Harry.

“Oh, I think it matters a great deal,” said Hermione. She continued on to the outside courtyard. Harry, Ron and Ginny shrugged at each other and followed.

Ginny spent most of the week revising with the other fifth years for her OWLs. The OWLs started a week before the normal exams, and lasted two full weeks. Harry was busy revising for his own exams and preparing to administer one to his own class. Much of it was practical, so he had to be well prepared. He spent most of his free time in the library revising with Ron and Hermione.

Wednesday evening, Harry and Ron went to meet Hermione in the library to study until the beginning of their Astronomy class at midnight. As they walked through the library looking for her, they came across Heather and Mary. The two girls were haphazardly dusting a row of books while they giggled and whispered to each other.

“Why are you two in here dusting instead of revising?” Harry asked them.

They turned and smiled at Harry, but frowned grumpily when they saw Ron.

“Ask him,” said Heather, pointing at Ron. “It's all his fault.”

“My fault? What are you on about?” asked Ron crossly.

“You forgot your six-month anniversary with Hermione, and she's been all tetchy since,” explained Mary.

“Six-month what?”

“No flowers, no sweets, not even a mention. She's been cracking to vent her spleen

on someone, and had a right cob on when she found us, thanks to you,” said Heather accusingly.

“Your detentions had nothing to do with Ron being a forgetful clod,” Hermione's voice rang out from a few feet to their left. Mary and Heather jumped in surprise and defensively moved closer to each other. Hermione stepped nearer and continued, “I caught you both wondering around the castle hours after the first year's curfew. That's why you two are supposed to be dusting in detention, and *not* chatting with boys.”

Mary's confident look failed her completely and she seemed to shrink under Hermione's furious glare. Heather also looked scared at first; then her eyes flicked over and beyond Hermione, and she relaxed. She stared straight into Hermione's eyes with a face as unreadable as a world championship poker player. “We didn't blame him for us getting caught. We blamed him for your foul mood that got us detention when a telling off would have done. Just because you've had a tiff with your boyfriend is no reason to take it out on us,” said Heather firmly.

Harry thought Hermione's eyes were going to pop out in fury. She pointed her index finger at Heather threateningly, “That is enough!” she half shouted. “You are the two most obnoxious, arrogant first years that I have *ever* seen! You get caught in the act and –”

“Just what do you think you're doing, Miss Granger?” demanded the librarian, Madam Pince. She was a thin, irritable, old witch who bore an uncanny resemblance to an underfed vulture as she leered down at the group. Hermione, Ron and Harry nearly jumped out of their skins. Heather and Mary tried mightily to suppress smiles.

“I was reprimanding these two for not –,” started Hermione.

“The library,” interrupted Madam Pince, “is hardly the place for a loud telling off. I would think that a sixth year student, and a prefect, would know this by now. I want the lot of you out of here this instant.”

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She started to turn, but Heather spoke up. “But Madam Pince, Mary and I are serving detention. We can't go yet.”

“Consider it served. Now leave! I am thoroughly sick of the sight of you,” replied the librarian. She turned and stomped back toward her desk.

Behind Madam Pince's back, Heather held up her hand and Mary high-fived her triumphantly. The two girls grabbed their bags from a nearby table and walked out, smiling at Harry as they passed. Harry noticed that neither of them dared a glance at the fuming Hermione.

Hermione watched them leave with the same combination of annoyance and admiration that she had shown the day the Slytherins left Hogwarts. “I will never trust nor underestimate those two again,” Hermione sighed. “C'mon, let's go to the Common Room until Astronomy Observation starts.”

Harry noticed that evening in the Gryffindor Common Room that Mary and Mark Evans were studying about as far away from Hermione as the tables would allow.

In spite of being busy preparing for exams, Harry noticed a few peculiar things afoot around the school. Mars was now eating his meals in the Great Hall. While he still looked exhausted, he seemed in good spirits and was always speaking with Hagrid, Flitwick and Professor Sprout. Professor McGonagall was still rather prickly, but Harry knew she must be under tremendous stress. The only person she seemed interested in speaking with was Snape. Both she and Snape avoided Mars as though he were contagious. Each immediately left the room whenever he entered; but Mars never took any visible notice of their flight.

That Sunday afternoon, Harry and Ron, after a long struggle, convinced Hermione to take a break and walk outside for a short while. Ginny was far too busy revising for her Charms OWL the next day, so the three went without her. When they walked out of the Entrance Hall, they saw Professors Mars, Hagrid, Sprout, and Flitwick all standing at the

base of the steps. Approaching the professors were a group of elderly witches and wizards that Harry recognized from his OWLs last year.

“It's the professors from the Wizzarding Examinations Authority,” said Hermione, pointing. When the venerable group reached the Hogwarts professors, Mars greeted them warmly.

“Professor Marchbanks, it's a pleasure to welcome you to Hogwarts.”

“My dear boy Mars, from the first OWL I examined you in I knew you would be a professor one day,” the ancient witch replied loudly as she gave him her hand.

“Griselda, my head is big enough,” Mars protested.

“Never the less, when you came to visit me last June in my office, I could still remember your Transfiguration NEWT as if it had been just the day before,” she said.

The professors started walking up the steps towards the three teenagers, still chatting. “Tell me, young Mars, what do you know of the peace talks between the Ministry and the Committee?” asked an old, bald, friendly-looking wizard.

“Well, Professor Tofty, from what I've been told they're at a standstill. It sounds to me like Lennon is stalling,” answered Mars.

“Do you think she's holding out for the Minister's job?” asked Tofty.

“It certainly seems that way,” said Mars.

“I just don't know what went wrong with her,” put in the plump witch. “She was such a lovely young girl when she was in school.”

The group had now reached the top of the steps. “Aha, Harry Potter,” said Professor Tofty. “It's good to see you again, lad.”

Harry, Ron and Hermione all smiled and said “Hi.”

“I remember your excellent patronus last year. Very rare to see that during an OWL examination.”

“I think you'll see another one this year sir,” said Harry.

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“Really?”

“Yes sir. Ron's sister, Ginny Weasley, casts the charm quite well. She even managed it when –” Harry shut up at a sharp pain from Hermione standing on his foot.

“When – when the whole class was watching her,” Hermione finished quickly. “She's really fabulous at it.” Hermione glared at Harry for his near-slip in mentioning their dementor training.

“Very well, I'll make sure to ask her to demonstrate it,” said Professor Tofty eagerly.

“Professors,” said Mars, looking at Flitwick and Sprout, “would you please show the examiners to their quarters? I have a few things to attend to.”

The professors nodded smilingly and led their guests into the Entrance Hall. Mars stayed behind with the three teenagers. “Quick thinking, Hermione,” Mars smiled at her.

“Mars, I needta nip out inter the forest fer a bit. To a – take care of sommat, yeh know, important,” said Hagrid uncomfortably.

“Hagrid, anything you can say in front of me you can say in front of them,” said Mars, tilting his head at Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

“You shoulde'n go encouragin 'em like that. They're nosy enough as it is,” Hagrid protested.

“I stand by my statement, partner. I trust all three, plus Ginny, with my life,” said Mars.

“Fine, suit yerself. I didn't say I didn't trus' 'em, anyway. I'll find yeh when yer alone later,” said Hagrid. He turned and walked down the steps four at a time.

Mars shook his head as he watched Hagrid head toward the forest. “Y'all coming back inside with me?” he asked. They nodded and joined him as he entered the Entrance Hall.

“Are you friends with Professor Marchbanks?” asked Hermione.

“I never considered her one. I'm shocked she remembered my Transfiguration NEWT – I barely recall it myself. Tell Ginny best of luck from me on her Charms OWL tomorrow, would you?” said Mars, turning down a corridor that led to the western part of the castle.

The three began their climb up the staircase to Gryffindor Tower, giving up the idea of a nice break outside.

“Why did Mars go that way?” asked Harry. “There's not much down that hall except the Ravenclaw's tower.”

“I'm more interested in knowing why he visited Professor Marchbanks last June in her office,” said Hermione suspiciously.

Monday morning, Harry, Hermione and Ron were eating breakfast in the Great Hall. Ginny was with them, but because her first OWL was about to start, she was too nervous to eat. Instead, she pored over scrolls of Charms notes.

Harry was chatting with Ron when he saw Hermione's bushy brown hair flutter as if blown by a zephyr. Her head jerked up, and she looked over at the Great Hall's entrance. Harry followed her gaze and saw Padma and Hannah Abbot standing there, staring at Hermione.

“I'll be right back,” said Hermione. She hurried over to the two other prefect girls. When she came back to the table a few moments later, Ginny put down her notes and asked, “What did they say?”

“Both said they saw Mars enchanting their house doorways last night. All kinds of odd markings and drawings appeared and completely covered the entrances. When he finished, the marks faded from view, and the doors looked normal again,” answered Hermione.

“Did he say anything to them?” asked Harry.

“Just 'Hello',” Hermione shrugged.

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“They must be glyphs. But would they work if they aren't visible?” asked Ginny.

“I wouldn't think so, but maybe they're not visible until they've been activated,” suggested Hermione.

“But why just the the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff doors?” asked Ron.

“Who knows if he did ours or Slytherin's? Hannah and Padma just happen to be there when he was enchanting theirs,” offered Hermione.

When they finished breakfast the three sixth years wished Ginny good luck and headed off to Defense Against the Dark Arts. As Harry expected, Mars continued to prepare the class for the exam. They all practiced together, and Harry was impressed at how well everyone was getting at dodging and blocking spells. Neville and Ron were incredible with their shield charms; in fact, Mars had them play a odd game of tennis with a stunner they deflected back and forth at each other. Hermione's and Padma's charms also impressed Harry. Their tearing charm ripped holes through four inches of solid wood, and Hermione's stunning charm was wide enough to hit three people at once. Maybe there was something to this Universal Whatever System, he thought.

The rest of the week passed much like Monday. They saw Ginny at meals, then went off to classes and revision as she took her OWLs. On Saturday, the four allowed themselves a break, and then revised all day Sunday.

At dinner Sunday night, Harry asked Ginny how she had done on her first week of OWLs.

“Well, I know for a fact I earned an Outstanding in Defense Against the Dark Arts theory and practical. Especially after Professor Tofty asked me to conjure a corporeal patronus for extra credit,” said Ginny excitedly.

Ron and Hermione beamed at Harry.

“I think I did very well in Charms, Transfiguration and Ancient Runes,” Ginny continued, “but Herbology I'm not sure about. Tomorrow is Potions so I'm a bit worried.”

“It'll be okay,” responded Harry. “Ron and I did great once that Death Eater wasn't around.”

Ginny smiled at Harry and Ron high-fived him, but Hermione looked put out.

The first exam for Ron, Harry and Hermione was Defense Against the Dark Arts. Much like Professor Lupin's exam, Mars' test was practical. Each student had to work their way through a maze of obstacles and spells using counter jinxes, hexes, and agility. The maze was interspersed with floating chalkboards with written questions for the students to answer. Harry finished the challenges ahead of the other students; Hermione was second by a few minutes, with Ron, Padma and Neville following a bit behind her. When the sixth years left the classroom, they all felt they had done very well. Harry felt more like he had conquered something rather than just passing an exam.

The rest of Harry's exams were not nearly as much fun, but he still felt he was doing well. His last was Care of Magical Creatures on Thursday, and then on Friday he was to administer the exam to his first year Defense Against the Dark Arts class.

While the exam for Care of Magical Creatures was interesting, it was also hard. “How in the world are you supposed to tell the difference between a female and male moke after they shrink down to only a quarter of an inch long?” demanded Harry as they left the paddock holding the hippogriffs.

“That's easy, Harry. The male had a more colorful throat sac,” answered Hermione. “Whether the murtlap preferred crustaceans or mollusks was the question that made me think. I'm mostly sure that it likes crustaceans best, but —”

“How many times? Hermione, we don't want a rehash of the test! It was bad enough having to just take it,” demanded Ron.

“Fine,” said Hermione irritably. The three of them walked silently back inside the Castle for lunch.

On Friday, the exam Harry gave his students rewarded them for their speed at

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problem-solving. He wanted them to realize that every second they saved in recognizing a danger or in casting a spell could mean the difference between life and death.

His exam started with a set of written questions. The faster the students finished these, the more time they would have to cast spells during the practical stage. The practical stage made use of Mars' small floating chalkboards. Each chalkboard described a situation; the student then had to decide which of the spells they had learned was most appropriate, and cast the spell properly.

The last part of the examination was extra credit; it tested the students' dodging skill. As first years, they didn't have the knowledge or skills for him to teach them the shield charm, so Harry wanted to make sure that they had some defense against hostile spells. He would shoot stinging charms at them, and the student would get three points for each charm they dodged until they were hit.

Mary tore quickly through the first stage, and Harry saw her cast the correct spell effectively for each situation in the second part. When she got to Harry for the extra credit, however, his very first stinging charm hit her on the side. She glared at him accusingly as she walked to the back of the class to wait for Heather and Mark.

Heather was next to reach Harry, a few minutes later, but he had noticed she had cast the wrong spell at a few of the chalkboards. The Slytherin first year managed to dodge four of Harry's charms before he hit her in the back after a spinning move.

"Remember, never turn your back on what you're supposed to be dodging, Heather," he lectured as she went to join Mary.

Several students reached Harry and dodged their extra-credit charms before Mark Evans finally approached. Mark had taken so much time on the written portion that he had rushed the practical questions. He made up for his early miscues, however, by dodging eight stinging charms in the extra credit portion of the exam before Harry finally nailed him. Harry congratulated him on his performance, and Mark received a two-person

standing ovation from Heather and Mary.

When the last of his students had left, Harry collected his things and stopped at the door. He turned and looked around the classroom. Teaching this class had been a rewarding experience, and he knew he was going to miss it greatly. He sighed. "Maybe I can teach the second years next?" Harry smiled to himself as he closed the door behind him.

Chapter Twenty-Nine – Two Fronts of the War



Tuesday morning after breakfast, Harry, Hermione, Ginny and Ron walked out of the castle and onto the front lawn. It was a beautiful June morning that was quickly growing warm. Birds sang and flew from tree to tree. Their songs relaxed Harry as he strolled across the lawn. His sharp eyes picked out two objects flying toward Hogwarts over the Forbidden Forest; they were rapidly getting closer, and they were most certainly not birds.

“Are those people on broomsticks?” Harry pointed into the air.

“Yeah, and I'd swear that one on the left is Charlie,” responded Ron.

“And the other one looks like either Steele or Fleur,” said Ginny.

The two broom riders landed near Hagrid's hut and dismounted. Hagrid and Mars walked out from behind the hut to greet them.

“They look agitated. Something must be happening,” said Hermione.

Harry did not want to be left out of the loop. He started running towards the hut, motioning the others to follow. When Harry came within hearing range, Steele was speaking.

“... many hundreds of trolls, around three score giants, thirty or so Donnies, and about three times that many thralls.”

“What's a thrall?” Harry asked Steele as he skidded up to her, panting.

“A victim of the Imperius Curse,” answered Steele, who didn't seem in the least bothered by the sudden arrival of the four students.

“And the dragons?” Mars asked Steele.

“Dragons?” Hermione and Ron whispered to each other anxiously.

“All ten are miles away, still chasing the thestrals we doused in pheromones,” replied Charlie with satisfaction.

“His plan worked beautifully, Angel,” added Steele, flashing Charlie a smile.

“Any sign of Riddle?” asked Mars. Steele and Charlie shook their heads.

“Do we know what part of the forest they'll enter first?” asked Mars.

“Not yet, but we should within twenty minutes,” said Charlie.

“You've done well; we – hold on a minute.” Mars' eyes took on the faraway look Harry had seen in them before. “Yes—yes, they are gathering. The cease fire expires in two hours, and as we expected, the Committee is marshaling its forces around the Ministry. It will be a large and open battle. I simply have no idea how we're going to hide

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all this from the muggles. Henri and his troops are at the front lines with the remaining aurors, and Bill and Fleur are with the Minister,” said Mars.

“Is Fudge holding up?” asked Charlie.

“Bill seems to think so,” Mars replied. His eyes focused again as he turned to face Hagrid. “I think you should start, my old friend.” Mars' voice had an odd tone that Harry could not pin down. He stared at Mars' face, hoping one of his weird recent insights would occur, but nothing extraordinary was visible. He did note that Mars looked even worse than he had on Friday.

“Yeah, it's finally begun,” said Hagrid. “Never reckon'd I'd be at the center of the biggest battle o' the century.” He shook Mars' outstretched hand, said goodbye, and strode into the forest, with Fang following behind.

“Biggest battle of the century? The war, total war, it's starting today?” Hermione shivered.

“Yes, Hermione, it starts—and hopefully ends—today,” pronounced Mars. “It will probably be the bloodiest day in a thousand years.” For a moment his look of confidence faded again as he clenched his muscles painfully and trembled. Steele and Charlie glanced anxiously at each other and then at Mars.

“How could a war of this magnitude be won in a day?” asked Harry.

“Both sides have deployed all of their forces for the two battles,” Steele explained. “There are no reserves. Each victory today will be decisive, Harry.”

“That's the plan, anyway,” Mars smiled weakly.

“They're reporting,” said Steele, grabbing one of the talismans on her front. “The scouts say the army will enter at the middle of the forest's edge.”

“Very well, tell the scouts to inform Hagrid and Magorian, and then they are all to leave for the Ministry immediately,” said Mars.

“That is *not* what we agreed upon,” objected Steele. “That leaves you only your

honor guard, plus Charlie and I.”

“I am well aware of which forces will be at Hogwarts. The battle plan is not something that is agreed upon, Commander; it is what *I* decide. Now, carry out your order,” directed Mars.

Steele slapped her feet together, stood perfectly straight, nodded her head sharply, and snapped, “As you demand!” She relayed his orders to the scouts.

Mars turned to Charlie. “Charlie, round up the honor guard and have them wait at the front doors.” Charlie nodded and took off on his broom.

“Sonarus!” said Mars, holding his wand to his throat. His voice was broadcast across the school grounds. “Attention students and staff, this is an emergency. All students report to the Great Hall immediately. Once there, Ravenclaws and Gryffindors are to locate Professor Flitwick and follow his instructions. Slytherins and Hufflepuffs will do the same with Professor Sprout. Remaining staff members will report to the staffroom. There can be *no* exceptions to this order.” Mars lowered his wand.

“Supreme Commander,” said Steele stiffly. “Shall I wait with the honor guard at the front doors for you?” Her face was flushed with anger.

“Yes, Sally,” replied Mars in a friendlier tone. Steele, however, was not mollified; she turned sharply and marched coldly toward the front doors.

Harry looked around at his friends. Their faces reflected his own feelings. He had no idea what to do or expect. He felt powerless and completely swept up in the situation. Total war was about to break out all around him – what part would he play?

Now facing the castle, Mars waved his wand around and jabbed it at the school. A loud humming noise came from everywhere and nowhere. A moment later, an enormous symbol of the Gryffindor lion appeared in the air above the school – it was half as wide as the castle itself. Harry and the others gaped at it as it spun several times. It was then replaced by an equally large rotating Ravenclaw eagle symbol. The Slytherin symbol then

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appeared, followed by the Hufflepuff symbol. When the last symbol vanished, there was a loud series of grinding noises, followed by the sounds of locks being locked, gates being closed, latches being latched, and great gears being turned, as if a enormous war machine was being fired up after centuries of non-use. There was one last very loud click, and then silence.

Mars swayed a bit as he lowered his wand. Apparently the spell had taken a lot out of him. “C'mon,” he said, and inhaled deeply. “We need to go inside and speak with the staff.”

“What kind of spell was that?” asked Harry.

“I merely cast an activation spell, Harry. The real work for the enchantment was done by the Hogwarts Four when they founded the school. All of Hogwarts' defenses are now locked and loaded. The castle will now defend itself against any invaders,” answered Mars.

“Defenses?” thought Harry. “Why didn't Dumbledore activate them when everyone thought Sirius was trying to kill me?” He shook his head and followed Mars toward the castle.

Normally Harry had to jog to keep up with Mars' long strides, but he found himself actually having to slow his gait to match Mars' unsteady steps. Harry saw Steele alone at the top of the steps near the front doors; she did not look at them as they approached. Ginny broke away from Harry as they neared Steele, ran ahead to the Defender and threw her arms around the tall woman's mid-section. Steele returned the embrace and kissed Ginny gently on the forehead. They whispered a few words to each other as Harry's group passed, but Steele steadfastly avoided Mars' eyes. Ginny ran to rejoin them at the center of the Entrance Hall.

Mars sighed and stopped. “I should have known,” he said.

“Known what?” asked Harry.

“That there are three first years in this school that think they are clever enough to avoid my detection, even though I just activated hundreds of sensor charms.”

“Let me guess,” said Hermione. “It's Heather, Mary, and Mark, isn't it?”

Mars nodded. “Ron and Ginny,” he turned to them, “please go get them, chew them out good, and drag them by the ears to Ravenclaw Tower. Don't touch the entrance; just call through it to Professor Flitwick. I'll let him know you're coming. Afterwards, wait outside the staffroom.”

“Where are they?” Ginny asked.

“Second Floor girls' bathroom. I guess they went there because it's always out of order because of –” answered Mars.

“Moaning Myrtle,” finished Harry, Ron and Hermione together.

Mars smiled at them. “Well, get going then,” he told the Weasleys.

“But I don't know the path to Ravenclaw Tower,” said Ron.

“I do. C'mon then,” said Ginny, grabbing her brother's hand and dragging him toward the nearest staircase.

Harry, Hermione and Mars continued to the staffroom. Mars bid them to wait outside for Ron and Ginny; he went in alone. The Weasleys showed up after a few minutes, looking irritated.

“Hermione, I agree with you now about those three little snot-rags,” said Ron hotly.

“You mean they resisted you?” asked Hermione disbelievingly.

“I had to pull my wand on the girls, and Evans forced Ron to stun him,” answered Ginny with equal annoyance.

“Just what do you teach them in that class of yours, Harry?” demanded Ron.

Harry shrugged and said, “They're some of my better students; in fact, Mary *is* the best. None of them cause *me* any trouble.”

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The three prefects were glaring at Harry when the staff room door swung quickly open and Snape stormed out, followed by McGonagall and the Astronomy teacher, Sinistra.

Snape saw the four students by the door and sneered at them viciously. "Oh, yes, I can see just how safe that mercenary is keeping the students," he barked as he hurried past. McGonagall eyed each of them carefully as she passed silently, but Professor Sinistra was in hysterics.

"Why would he do this to me?" she wailed. "He was one of my favorite students!" Sinistra put her hand on Harry's shoulder. "Haven't I always been a good and fair teacher, dear?"

Nervously, Harry nodded. "Course you have."

"Then ask *him* why he hates me so!" she demanded, pointing at the staffroom. She walked away, sobbing into a handkerchief.

Harry and his friends looked at each other in confusion and waited impatiently for Mars. A few minutes later, the rest of the professors spilled out of the room, led by Professor Vectra, who was hurrying the others along to Dumbledore's office. Finally, Mars opened the door and started out, but a familiar voice rang out from the room behind him.

"Mars! Are you there? Mars, I need to speak with you urgently."

Mars raised his eyebrows as he turned and answered, "Yes, Minister, what's wrong?" The door closed behind him as he returned to the staffroom.

"Is Fudge in there?" Ron asked the others.

"I doubt it. He's probably speaking through the fireplace," answered Hermione.

"He sounded very desperate," added Harry.

Two minutes later, Mars reemerged and bid them to follow him quickly to the front doors. Mars forced a quick pace and was soon breathing heavily.

Ginny asked Mars, deeply concerned, “What did Minister Fudge want?”

“More troops,” he panted.

“But – but you only have your honor guard, plus Charlie and Steele,” said Harry.

“I know,” said Mars. He inhaled deeply. “That's what I told him.”

By the time they reached the front doors, Mars had to bend over and lean on the handles to catch his breath. They had not walked very fast or gone far at all; Harry was really worried. After a moment, Mars pulled a potion Harry didn't recognize from his pouch and drank it in one gulp. Hermione must have recognized it; she opened her mouth and pointed at it, but stopped herself.

Mars looked better immediately. He stood up straight, and handed the empty bottle to Hermione. “Please vanish that for me, quickly.”

Hermione took out her wand and vanished the bottle. Mars opened one of the large front doors and stepped outside. Harry started to follow, but Hermione grabbed his arm.

“That was a stim potion,” she hissed. “It will keep him on his feet for about half an hour.”

Harry nodded.

“That's not all,” Hermione continued. “Stim potions are very dangerous; they can cause internal damage, and they're illegal.”

“Keep up, you four!” They jumped, and followed Mars onto the landing at the top of the steps. On the landing were eight very intimidating Spirit Defenders, lined up in two rows of four, as well as Charlie and Steele. The Defenders gave the students lethal looking stares from either side. Harry felt quite uncomfortable; he was relieved when he and his friends had passed that gauntlet and reached Mars' far side, so that the red wizard was between them and the Defenders. Charlie walked up to Mars, but Steele stayed where she was, still determinedly avoiding Mars' eyes.

“Why are *they* still with you, Mars?” asked Charlie, pointing at Harry and his

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friends.

“I'm changing your deployment,” Mars answered.

This got Steele's attention. She uncrossed her arms and joined Charlie and Mars.

“The Ministry has just suffered many defections and needs reinforcements. You ten,” said Mars, with a sweeping gesture that included the two lines of defenders, Charlie, and Steele, “are to proceed there immediately and ask Bill where you're needed most. Sally will assume command over all Defenders from Henri once she arrives.”

Ginny and Hermione exchanged frightened looks. Charlie and the Defenders looked bewildered by the order; Steele stepped away from Mars and stared at him in disbelief.

“Have you idiots gone deaf? Get moving before I cut you all up for fire crab bait!” Mars shouted.

The Defenders all jumped, shouted “As you demand!” and ran down the steps toward the front gates.

“Mars, you can't be serious about sending us all away?” asked Charlie.

“As a heart attack, old friend. Bill and Fleur need your help more than I do.”

“You are afflicted!” shrieked Steele. She moved in front of Mars and stared straight into his sullen eyes. “You are so weak you can only walk by taking stim potions! And now your mind seems as broken as your body; yet you still refuse to tell me what's wrong with you.” Her fists shook with rage.

“Are you defying my command?” asked Mars sternly.

Steele looked momentarily stunned at Mars' callousness; then her face reddened with anger. “As a Defender, no; as your half-sister, yes! If you try to pull rank on me again, I will resign in a heartbeat. You'll have to *kill* me before I'll leave your side again, Angel. You are in no condition to fight, much less on your own.”

Steele's face softened and Harry saw great worry shining through her eyes. She

seemed convinced that her cousin was going to meet his death. Harry was certain that Mars could read her thoughts and emotions exactly as Harry did.

“Sally, are you actually concerned about my welfare?” asked Mars softly. There was no sarcasm in his voice, just genuine surprise.

Steele's right arm lashed out with lightning speed; her open hand caught Mars across the face. He staggered from the blow, and would have fallen if Harry and Ron had not caught him.

“How can you say such a thing?” demanded Steele, uncharacteristic tears running down her face. “I have loved you since we were old enough to recognize each other. How can you not know?”

“Sally, you misunderstand me,” answered Mars, rubbing his face. “I didn't question your caring, but your worry. Never before have you doubted my ability. I ask you, dear cousin, when have I *ever* lost a fight?”

Steele stared into his eyes for a few seconds and seemed to gather strength from them. She put her arms gently around his neck and kissed him on the cheek.

“I don't know why you put so many resources into saving a Ministry that has tried to murder you, Angel, but on your order I will defend it.”

Steele let go of him and asked Charlie if he was ready. Charlie hugged Mars, Ginny, and Ron, and then left with Steele for the front gates.

Mars reached into his pouch, withdrew another stim potion, and started to drink it.

“Mars, you can't keep using those! They'll kill you,” said Hermione frantically.

Mars finished the draught and handed the bottle to Ron to vanish. He said, “Don't fret, Hermione, it's just for a little while longer. Quickly, we must get to the north tower.”

Mars could move much more quickly under the effects of the stim potion; soon they approached a door in the North Tower with many markings covering it from top to bottom. It hummed with magical energy.

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“That's just like the Ravenclaw entrance,” exclaimed Ron.

“Well, it's similar, Ron. Make sure that you never touch a door like this unless you know you're allowed to enter it, like my office, or if it's one you can decipher. They are very dangerous,” explained Mars. He moved his hand through a few deliberate motions in front of the door before placing a finger on a mark near the center. The door swung silently inward and Mars led them inside. The room's furnishings were sparse: six chairs, a table, and an oddly placed sink. The most prominent feature of the room was a large window on the eastern wall that commanded a fantastic view of the Forbidden Forest.

When they were inside, Mars spoke. “Do not open this door for anyone. Only Sally, Bill and I can read the entry sequence, and other than Tom Riddle himself, only Professor Dumbledore has the power to force it open. No one else has any business coming to get you.”

“Dumbledore? Does that mean he's escaped?” asked Hermione.

“He will soon, Hermione; I doubt his captors can hold him much longer. This very day, he will return to Hogwarts, and you all shall celebrate the victory together,” answered Mars.

“Have you seen this? Are you sure?” asked Harry.

“Positive, Harry.”

This raised Harry's spirits; with Dumbledore back, he was confident Hogwarts could be defended against anything.

Mars looked at Harry. “I'm leaving now to join Hagrid in the forest.” Harry nodded at him. “Harry, I don't know how long you'll be stuck up here, but you'll know when your time has arrived.” He then looked at the other three teenagers. “I expect all of you to perform admirably today; you're my apprentices, after all. Don't embarrass me now,” Mars smiled.

“We won't,” Harry, Ron, and Ginny replied, choking.

CRACK

Mars was gone; and the wait began.

Hermione sat down in one of the chairs and stared at the walls, lost in thought. Ron alternated between sitting next to her and pacing in a square around the room. Harry and Ginny leaned on the windowsill, staring out onto the Forbidden Forest, straining their eyes for some sign of the battle they knew was brewing there.

At intervals, a loud noise came from the forest--often an explosion, sometimes a yell or a roar. Each noise brought Ron running to the window to join Harry and Ginny in scanning the trees for its source. A few times, Harry saw something black skimming the treetops. He couldn't be sure, but he thought it was either a thestral or a dementor.

"Harry," said Ginny, during a particularly extended silent period. "Do you think we'll get out of this all right? At first I felt very confident and brave; I was ready to fulfill my part in this; but all this waiting is letting doubt creep in. Was there a mistake? Am I the wrong person to be with you now, on the day Voldemort comes for you?"

"What do you mean, wrong person?" asked Harry.

"When Mars started training us, Harry, he told us that the time would come when he couldn't be there for you. That we were being taught to help and protect you through your coming ordeal. There were times that he made it sound like you were going to be the one who defeated Voldemort, and not he or Dumbledore. I didn't really know what to think about that, but it didn't matter. I put everything into those lessons, Harry; my marks in Herbology and History of Magic suffered, but I had to make sure I was ready. I wanted to be able to protect you, and—and make you proud of me," said Ginny. She turned her head from Harry and looked back into the forest.

Harry was taken aback. He stammered, "Ginny, I'm already --"

"But now," Ginny interrupted, "I realize that I jumped at the opportunity because of emotional reasons and not logical ones. I worry that it should be Fleur or Steele here

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with you. Wouldn't it make more sense to have a battle-tested witch at your side rather than a fifteen-year-old girl?"

Before Harry could think of an answer, a terrible crashing—the loudest noise yet—rang out of the forest. Harry and Ginny looked out the window and saw two giants emerging from the trees, knocking some of the smaller trees aside as they hurried into the clear. The shorter giant was bald and had a head shaped like a lumpy boulder. The other giant was considerably taller—it towered over the other by at least seven feet—and had matted, shoulder-length black hair. It appeared to be female.

The giants covered ground very quickly as they ran north along the edge of the forest. As they passed closest to the window from which Harry was watching, Hermione said, "That's Grawp, isn't it?" She and Ron were now standing beside him at the window.

"Yeah," Harry replied. "I wonder who the female is; she's enormous."

"I'd say," choked out Ron. "I've never seen a giant before. Blimey, she's taller than Mars standing on Hagrid's shoulders."

Twelve trolls, a witch, and a wizard came out of the forest to the north of the giants. Apparently they heard the thundering footsteps of the approaching giants, because they immediately turned to face them. The female giant let out a ferocious roar and leaped into the trolls, scattering them like bowling pins. One of the flying trolls knocked down the wizard, but the witch managed to get a spell off at Grawp. "Avada Kedavra!" she cried, and a green flash hit Grawp in the shoulder.

Grawp's shoulder flinched as though hit by a large club; he roared in anger, but did not drop as Harry had expected. He took another step, snatched the terrified-looking witch off the ground, and threw her against a nearby oak tree. Meanwhile, the giantess stepped on the wizard as he tried to rise, crushing him to the ground, and then easily chased down the remaining three trolls. After finishing off the trolls, the giantess returned to Grawp, who was favoring his shoulder where the curse had hit him. The female giant

looked at Grawp's shoulder for a while, poking it a few times with apparent concern. Grawp moved his arm around a bit; when it seemed that he had full movement, the two ran back into the forest.

“Look at the trees!” yelled Ron, pointing deeper into the forest. Looking where Ron was pointing, Harry saw scores of trees thrashing their limbs violently about. Red and green flashes of light could be seen through the foliage in that area. They heard cries, roars and explosions. Several extremely bright flashes of light were followed by loud cracking noises; gray smoke drifted up into the sky.

Most of the activity they could see seemed to be centered in that part of the deep forest, but more than once a few trolls, wizards, or giants would slip out of the edge of the forest. Each time, they were cut off by either Grawp and the giantess, or by a group of ten draft-horse-sized spiders. These were undoubtedly Acromantulas from the colony in the forest. They were the spawn of Aragog, an elephant-sized specimen whom Hagrid had hatched while he was a student at Hogwarts; the spider colony had remained on friendly terms with the gentle giant.

After several hours, the noises and movement in the center of the forest died down quite a bit. The four teenagers could then hear shouting and crashing noises from behind them, inside the castle, in the floors below.

“Does that mean they've made it to the castle?” asked Hermione nervously.

“Not from this way they haven't,” said Harry. “None of the lot has lasted thirty feet once they set foot outside the forest.”

“Maybe they came from the front entrance?” suggested Ron.

“But if everyone's locked away in the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff common rooms or Dumbledore's office, then who's fighting the Death Eaters downstairs?” asked Ginny.

“The castle itself,” said Hermione. “All of its defenses have been activated, remember?”

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“But what does that mean? That the Bloody Baron and Moaning Myrtle are trying to scare the Death Eaters into running away from Hogwarts?” asked Ron.

“Well, I can't know for sure, but I would think that if you were an invader, the doors would resist opening, the staircases would try to lead you in circles, the carpet would try to trip you, and maybe even the suits of armor would attack you,” answered Hermione.

“Look, it's Hagrid!” exclaimed Ginny, pointing at the ground. Harry, Ron and Hermione quickly followed her pointing finger. Hagrid and five centaurs were prowling in the clearing near the tree line. Hagrid had his crossbow out and loaded; each centaur carried a composite bow. As with the giants, they seemed to anticipate that a group of enemies was about to burst from the forest; they all raised their weapons and aimed ahead. Seconds later, a group of thirty or more trolls ran out of the forest, straight into the fire of arrows.

The trolls wheeled around and charged Hagrid's group. The centaurs loosed another volley of arrows, dropping more trolls. By the time the trolls reached the archers, only five were still alive. Hagrid smote the first troll stupid enough to get within range, sending the beast flying off to the side. The centaurs all had short spears readied and attacked the trolls hand to hand. Hagrid made short work of the remaining trolls, who were unable to simultaneously avoid his enormous fists and the spears of the centaurs.

Harry stared more closely at Hagrid. “That looks like blood on his shoulder; do you think Hagrid's hurt?” he asked.

“He seems to be moving okay, I hope it's nothing serious – oh my,” said Hermione, as Mars apparated in front of one of the centaurs.

“That's Magorian he's talking to, I think,” said Ron. Harry agreed.

Mars spoke with the group and walked around, pointing and gesturing. He was moving better than he had in weeks. “I wonder how many stim potions he took to be able

to move that well?” asked Hermione, very concerned.

Suddenly, all of the centaurs except Magorian took flight into the forest at top speed. “Why did they take off like that?” asked Ginny.

Magorian was now pointing up into the sky. Harry craned his head upward to see what the centaur had spotted, when he heard a terrifying roar—so horrible that it made the snarling of the barghest seem no worse than the mew of one of Mrs Figg's cats. A roar so loud and penetrating that his internal organs shook and pushed a great lump up his throat. He forced his eyes to continue upward until he saw something flying in the air.

Fear struck Harry's brain like a bat hits a bludger. A cold numbness crept down Harry's front and into his legs, rooting him to the spot. His hands gripped the stone window sill so tightly he thought his fingertips had burrowed an inch into it. He was positive that this was his last minute on Earth – he knew he was about to die.

An enormous monster was flying at him from over the Forbidden Forest. It had the head and body of a lion, giant feathered wings, and a very long serpent for a tail. It roared again, and fire belched from its mouth, shooting out for many feet as it flew closer.

Ginny and Hermione shrieked in utter terror and ran away from the window. Harry felt Ron bump into him and then slide down in a dead faint. Harry couldn't move anything but his gaze, which he flashed down to Hagrid and Mars.

Hagrid and Magorian were standing in front of Mars. Mars had one hand up, palm out, and the other jabbed at the forest. They protested and then went grudgingly into the trees. Mars drew his wand and walked toward the middle of the clearing.

The chimera roared again. Harry could just barely see it making an awkward turn near the Astronomy Tower. The girls whimpered from somewhere behind him, and Ron still lay immobile at his feet. Just as the chimera was at the apex of its turn, Mars shouted, “Displacio!”

Millions of tiny red orbs shot of his wand. They were tightly packed together into a

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thick cord that lashed out and struck the chimera in the breast. Professor McGonagall had told Harry that the Displacement Charm of a powerful wizard like Dumbledore or Mars could rip a muggle building the size of Hogwarts Castle out of the ground and throw it into the lake. Mars' charm, however, barely knocked the chimera off course.

The course change, however, was enough to send the clumsy flying beast crashing into the battlements of the Astronomy Tower. Harry watched it skid through the area where he made his celestial observations and disappear out of sight. Several seconds later Harry heard a loud thud – the chimera had evidently fallen off the highest tower at Hogwarts.

With the chimera out of sight, Harry found that he could move again. He gingerly released his white-knuckled grip on the window sill and turned to look for Hermione and Ginny. They were huddled together in a corner, gripping each other tightly, shaking in terror. He staggered over to them as quickly as he could force his numb legs to move.

Harry reached down, put one hand on Ginny's shoulder, and raised her head with the other until she was looking into his eyes.

“Ginny,” he said. “It's dead. There's no reason to fear.”

He then felt her fear – felt the impending sense of doom that dominated her thoughts. Harry could see there was no hope left in her, only sadness. She feared that she had failed, failed to protect. Protect whom? Himself – protect Harry Potter!

Her fears swirled around in his mind. He was scared at first, but then he thought, “The chimera's dead, it dropped three hundred feet.” The fear melted away. Harry snapped out of his trance and shook his head. He felt guilty for his unexpected invasion of Ginny's inner thoughts.

“Harry, I feel much better now. What did you do?” said Ginny, pulling herself up with Harry's help.

“I'm not sure,” he answered truthfully, and then reached down to Hermione.

He tried to reach Hermione the same way as he had Ginny, but it seemed now that he was consciously trying, he couldn't do it. Luckily, Hermione seemed to be snapping out of her fear on her own. Soon she was up, and the three of them went over to Ron.

“Enervate!” said Ginny as she pointed her wand at Ron.

“Chimeras are horrible monsters. No one's ever faced one and lived,” said Hermione, still looking unnerved.

“No one?” asked a woozy Ron, standing up.

“Well, an ancient Greek wizard did kill one once, but he fell off his flying horse and died right afterward. They're virtually immune to magic,” explained Hermione.

At a tremendous roar from outside, the four jumped as if the floor had been electrified.

“I thought you said it was dead, Harry!” shrieked Hermione.

Harry stepped up to the window, with the others behind him. They looked down and saw the chimera prowling the north side of the lawn near the forest's edge. Both its wings were broken and folded out at odd angles. The monster also bled from several cuts, but it still moved vigorously as it hunted furiously for its prey.

“Where's Mars?” asked Ron. Harry spotted Mars far south of the chimera and quickly pointed him out.

The red wizard jabbed his wand at the monster and cried “Stupefy!” An enormous red stunner shot across the lawn and struck the chimera on the head. Harry expected the massive stunner to knock out the chimera or at least disorient it, but all it accomplished was to let the monster know Mars' location. Mars looked undisturbed by this turn of events, however, as the chimera wheeled in his direction.

It roared again and belched out a thirty-foot column of fire that wilted the grass in front of it. Snarling, it bounded toward Mars with huge leaps of its powerful lion legs. It had covered half the distance when Mars waved his wand in a clear S-curve, jabbed it at

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the ground in front of the oncoming monster, and shouted, “Diffindo!”

Harry was startled at Mars' use of a mundane spell normally used to tear cords off bound packages. Then the spell hit the ground in front of the chimera and tore an enormous fissure in the earth that would easily have swallowed three buses. Small tremors shook the castle; Harry, Ginny, Hermione and Ron grabbed the sill and each other as the floor quivered beneath them.

The chimera, in mid-bound, was unable to change course and plummeted helplessly into the hole, roaring in fury. Harry looked into the rift, but could not make out the monster in its depths. Seconds later, however, fire shot up from the hole and a head emerged from the blackness.

“It's climbing out!” he yelled.

The chimera's great claws dug into the sides of fissure as it slowly pulled itself up. Mars flicked his wand at the crack in the earth and bellowed, “Condenseo!” The castle shook again and the earth groaned as the fissure began to close. Awful cries of anguish bellowed from the fissure. Huge chunks of the lawn had fallen into the depths of the chasm when it opened, so the edges of the fissure now failed to meet completely, leaving a gap where the chimera clung. Powerful claws dug away at the dirt and rocks, freeing the beast from the earth's grip.

“How can that thing still be alive?” demanded Ron.

Hermione held both hands over her mouth, digging her fingernails into her face; Ginny leaned on Harry for support. Harry wished he had some way to help Mars, but he had no idea how to kill something that was so tough and immune to magic spells.

Mars was now moving his arms rhythmically as he hopped, stepped and jumped in a rough circle near the edge of the forest.

“What's he doing?” asked Ginny.

“He did something like that before he summoned that rainbow at Bill and Fleur's

wedding,” said Harry.

“He conjured that rainbow?” Hermione asked, surprised.

“Yeah,” answered Ron. “He told us not to tell anyone about it, though.”

The sky dimmed as dark storm clouds began rolling into the area. Raindrops splatted on the window and thunder rumbled in the distance. Lightning flashed in the sky and the rain began to pour down in earnest as Mars continued his dance. By the time the chimera's head was fully above-ground, the clouds and the torrential downpour had made it so dark that Harry could barely see the monster. When Mars' dance was finished, great forks of lightning ripped at the sky, followed by deafening thunderclaps, and even the largest trees bent under the fierce wind.

From the ground, a great roar and a flash of flame revealed that the chimera had freed itself and was now on the surface. A lightning flash revealed the extent of its injuries: both of the monster's wings had been torn off, its back was twisted out of shape, and one hind leg was mangled.

A red stunner flashed from the forest and hit the chimera. Once again, the spell accomplished nothing but to get its attention; the beast lumbered toward the trees the charm had come from. Mars and the chimera were now out of sight in the forest. Any movements they made were obscured by the thrashing of the trees in the wind, the darkness of the storm, and the pounding rain. Harry had no idea where they were.

Large bolts of lightning struck repeatedly in one area of the forest. Several trees near there were now burning. After half a dozen strikes, Ginny asked, “Do you think Mars is controlling those bolts?”

Hermione opened her mouth to answer when they heard shouting from outside the door.

“Potter, Weasley. Are you in there?” It was Professor McGonagall's voice; she sounded frightened.

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They looked at each other in confusion. Did they dare let anyone know that Harry was here?

“You must let me in!” McGonagall shrieked. “My colloportus charm won't hold them back for long!”

“What should we do?” asked Ron.

“We can't just leave her to the Death Eaters,” Hermione cried.

“No! We mustn't open the door,” said Ginny. “Mars said no one had any business getting in who couldn't open it themselves.”

“No, Ginny, he said no one else had any business coming to get us. She didn't come to get us, she came for help!” said Hermione.

“But why isn't she with the other teachers in Dumbledore's office?” asked Harry.

“Because Mars didn't let her, Snape or Professor Sinistra go with them. She's no place to hide, Harry!” said Hermione desperately.

“Potter, please!” screeched McGonagall pitifully. Ginny looked up at Harry and shook her head.

“Sorry, Ginny; we can't abandon her to them,” said Harry. He went over to the door; Hermione came with him. “Professor, I'm gonna open the door. Get in quickly so I can close it.”

“Hurry Potter!” she yelled.

Harry put his hand on the door handle and turned it. The door instantly stopped humming. He pulled the door open slightly and tried to peer out into the hall, but suddenly the door slammed backward, striking his head, and knocking both Harry and Hermione to the floor. Snape stood just inside the doorway, his hand still on the knob.

Ginny and Ron raised their wands, but Professor McGonagall, next to Snape, disarmed them with a spell that ripped the wands out of their hands and sent them flying into hers.

“Accio wands!” said Snape, and Hermione and Harry's wands flew to him from the floor.

From the floor, Harry shouted at Snape, “What are you doing?”

“Securing a very large reward for myself, Potter,” said Snape coldly.

Hermione sat up in confusion. She looked at McGonagall and asked, “Professor, I-I don't understand. Why are you holding your wand on us?”

“Be quiet, girl!” McGonagall snapped. “Get up and move over to the Weasleys there. You too, Potter.”

Harry glared at the two of them as he stood up. He helped Hermione to her feet and led her over to Ron and Ginny.

“Secure them,” ordered Snape. He walked over to the table and placed Harry and Hermione's wands upon it.

McGonagall pointed her wand at the corner of the room behind Harry and said “Elicio!” A small barred cell appeared. “Get in,” she snapped.

The four teenagers entered the cell reluctantly and McGonagall closed and locked it with a flick of her wand. She joined Snape at the table.

Hermione held onto the bars of the cell with both hands. “McGonagall...I can't believe it,” she whispered to herself.

“Harry,” whispered Ron. “What are we gonna do?”

“Wait until we get a chance to grab a wand. Till then, keep them talking if they try to hurt or kill us,” hissed Harry.

He looked around the room for anything that could give them some advantage, but the only promising thing he saw was the four of their wands now laying on the table. Snape stared silently out the window; McGonagall stood with her wand aimed at the door. The thunder and lightning outside had stopped, and the clouds seemed to be clearing.

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After some time had passed, Harry heard the sound of struggling in the hall outside. “Let go of me, you infernal rug!” a voice screamed. “Diffindo, Diffindo!” A moment later, five Death Eaters walked into the room, wearing long robes and evil-looking masks.

“Two hours!” Harry recognized Lucius Malfoy's voice. “It's taken us two hours to get up to this tower. How is it that you and she can still move about freely, while we get attacked?” The door slammed itself into the face of the last Death Eater, breaking his nose. Malfoy swore and flicked his wand at the open door; it vanished. Two of the other Death Eaters bent to patch up their injured comrade.

“Well?” asked Malfoy, turning to face Snape.

“The castle doesn't see us as its enemies yet. But we don't know how long that will last,” said Snape.

Malfoy's mask nodded. “I see that you have Potter locked up already, very good. We've had no luck in getting through the warded door of the Hufflepuff House, but that scarcely matters, now that we have the boy.” Malfoy then looked over at Professor McGonagall with suspicion.

“You're quite sure you can control her?” he asked Snape.

“She was very vulnerable once Dumbledore disappeared. She has put up no resistance – without hope, why should she?” said Snape darkly.

Malfoy laughed.

Harry felt a small measure of relief as he realized that Professor McGonagall must be a victim of Snape's Imperious Curse, and not an actual traitor; but the outlook remained bleak. He could only hope now that Mars would return from the forest before Voldemort came to kill him, or that Mars' prediction of Dumbledore's return would prove true and imminent. Harry knew he should be thinking of a contingency plan, but he was furious with himself for having been so stupid as to open the door for McGonagall in the

first place.

A familiar drawling voice snapped Harry out of his train of thoughts.

“Is my father up here with you lot?” the voice demanded imperiously.

“Back here, Draco,” Mr. Malfoy answered.

“If I could get my hands on him,” whispered Ron murderously.

A small masked wizard approached Lucius Malfoy, followed by two larger masked wizards. Harry guessed that these two must be Draco's sycophants, Crabbe and Goyle.

“You've had a note from the Ministry front. It came over an hour ago, but it took us that long to get up here. The blasted castle fought us every step,” said Draco, holding a scroll out in front of him.

Lucius Malfoy removed his mask and took the scroll from his son. He unrolled and read it, and a broad smile came to his face.

“Are things going well there, then?” asked Draco.

“No, not at all,” replied Lucius gleefully.

“Then why are you pleased?” asked Draco.

“You have so much to learn,” said Lucius patronizingly. “The Department of Law Enforcement Wizards are holding up much better than we had expected. It was thought most would run as soon as the fighting started. They have also been reinforced by a new set of Demon Fighters, and Did I read that right?”

“Read what?”

“Quiet!” demanded Lucius. He perused the scroll again for a few seconds and then spoke again. “Oh, we are fortunate today, my son! Not only was Dolohov humiliated by not taking the Ministry quickly, he's been killed in battle,” Lucius gloated.

“You're joking!”

“It seems he got into a duel with a tall, blond American witch, and didn't fare so well,” said Lucius Malfoy in mock sorrow.

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“Steele,” Ginny whispered to Harry, who nodded, but kept his attention on the Malfoys.

“With the heavy initial losses, they retreated and are regrouping. That won't sit well with the Dark Lord, will it?” Mr. Malfoy asked.

“Git outta me way, ya stupid Poms!” a wild-sounding voice called loudly from the doorway.

Harry looked up at the door and saw the Death Eaters parting for a tall wizard with long, scraggly brown hair. The wizard held his head at an odd angle, and each of his eyes were a different color; he looked quite insane. His robes were in tatters, and his face sported several bruises and cuts.

“Ah, Lucius! G'day, mate! I got a bit o' news for ya from the forest,” said the odd wizard.

“Yes, Reynolds, what do you have to report?” asked Malfoy stiffly.

“Well, I think it'll cheer up even your nasty disposition, Lucius. Our forces are wiped out, 'cept for yours truly, of course,” said Reynolds, poking a thumb at his chest.

“WHAT??!?!?”

“Calm down. Don't get all weepy on me, that's not the good news.”

Malfoy looked furious. “How can there be good news after that, you fool?”

“Cause, mate, the red wizard is no more. R.I.P. if ya know what I mean?”

Reynolds chuckled.

“Mars is dead? Are you sure?” asked Malfoy.

“Dead certain,” he cackled gleefully. “Killed 'im myself, I did!”

“You lie!” yelled Harry.

“Do I, Potter?” asked Reynolds, slowly walking over to the cell.

“You're nothing compared to him!” exclaimed Ron, glaring at Reynolds.

“Well, I'll admit I had plenty of help. The Yank was right shagged out after killin'

that chimera. He was barely managin' to stand when Anderson and I came up behind 'im," said Reynolds, turning back to Lucius Malfoy.

Malfoy nodded for him to continue.

"We pulled our wands out to curse 'im, but somehow he knew we wuz there. He spun round right quick and blasted old Anderson, but I nailed 'im. Bits of 'im everywhere," said the wild wizard. He cackled insanely for a long time. "Everywhere, mate!"

Draco sneered. "We're supposed to buy that a crazy old codger like you killed Mars? You've never even proved you slew Dumbledore, why should anyone believe you?"

"I thought Mars said he was trapped," whispered Hermione.

Reynolds spun woozily around to face Draco. "So, ya little whelp, callin' me a liar, are ya? Seen Dumbledore since I did 'im in, have ya?"

"No, but that doesn't mean—"

"Oh, ya want solid evidence eh? Somethin' ya can put yer hands on?" Reynolds lashed out and grabbed Draco Malfoy's left wrist. He forced Malfoy's hand open and dropped something round and gold into Draco's palm. "Recognize that, do ya? Ya little twonk!" said Reynolds.

Malfoy held the object between his thumb and forefinger and lifted it up to his face. Harry saw a golden circlet with the letters S.P.E.W. inside of it, each letter twinkling in turn.

"NO!" shrieked Hermione. "Oh Mars, no," she moaned. She put her head in her hands and slipped to the floor in tears.

"That's the SPEW badge he made at our house!" Ron cried.

Harry had recognized the trinket instantly. He remembered vividly how much Mars' joining S.P.E.W. had meant to Hermione. Mars would never have voluntarily

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parted with it.

“Well, the sheila there certainly knows it,” said Reynolds. He faced Hermione. “Did he mean a lot to you? If he did, you're out of luck, I'm afraid, cause there ain't a lot left of 'im!” Reynolds again cackled loudly; most of the Death Eaters joined him in laughing at Hermione's agony.

Harry felt ill. This was too painful to imagine, much less endure. Why couldn't they just kill him and get it over with?

“Well, Lucius, ya convinced yet?” asked the Australian.

“Yes, Geoff. You were brilliant today, as you were with Dumbledore's defeat. The Master will be very pleased,” answered Malfoy with forced politeness.

Reynolds smiled and said, “Teach your brat some manners and we'll share the glory that's coming today. I'm not greedy.”

“Who are you calling a brat? You pathetic nutter –”

Reynolds interrupted Draco with a hard slug in the stomach. Draco doubled up and keeled over onto the floor, moaning.

“Well, I'll leave the rest o' the lesson to you, Lucius,” Reynolds said. “Go ahead and give the signal to the Dark Lord that it's safe to enter Hogwarts now. I'll take these blokes down to the entrance to greet 'im. Could take us a while with the bloody carpets attackin' us constantly.”

“Yes, that's a good idea, Geoff. I'll send the message and then catch you up in a bit,” Malfoy replied.

In response to his signal, the other Death Eaters left the room, leaving the two Malfoys, Crabbe and Goyle. Mr. Malfoy walked over to the large window and opened it. He pointed his wand at the sky and a fireball shot out of it. The ball rose high into the sky and then exploded into a brilliant fiery plume that lit up the twilight. Draco, who had finally gotten back to his feet, approached his father as he turned away from the window.

Lucius glared at his son and struck him hard in the jaw. Draco fell back to the floor, then staggered to his feet again, taking off his mask.

“You fool!” spat Mr. Malfoy. “If you didn't look just like me, Draco, I'd bet my wand that you were the son of some traveling floo powder salesman instead my own. Do you have any idea how high Reynold's standing will be with the Dark Lord once he hears that Reynolds killed Mars in addition to Dumbledore?”

“But Father, there's no proof that Dumbledore's –”

“Shut up, you idiot! You *will* listen. Reynolds is off his rocker, but you do not insult someone who has just defeated our two greatest enemies. We can get rid of him later when he appears weak, but when he is strong we support him! Do you hear me?” shouted Lucius at his son.

Draco nodded silently.

“Good. Now you three stay here and guard the prisoners. The Dark Lord will want to deal with Potter and the Weasley children himself, but if you serve him well today, he may leave the mudblood to you. Do you understand me?” asked Lucius.

“Yes, father,” said Draco, smiling in spite of the pain of a fat bleeding lip. He leered at the captives.

The three guards milled about the room for a while after Lucius left. They chatted for a bit, staring out into the Forbidden Forest through the large window, but quickly grew bored. Harry knew this was a bad sign.

“You know, I almost forgot my promise, Potter,” said Draco, approaching the cell – though he wisely stopped well out of reach.

Harry was sitting on the floor, with his head leaning on the bars of the door. He didn't bother to look up at Malfoy as he replied, “What are you talking about?”

“Last we met, I told you that the next time I saw you, you'd be begging me for death. Prepare to be on your knees, Harry Potter,” said Malfoy with a laugh. His two

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sycophants guffawed along with him.

“Do what you like to me, Malfoy. I won't give you the satisfaction.”

“Oh, I don't doubt that, Potter.”

Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry and Harry braced himself for pain. He was determined to hold out until Voldemort arrived; he knew that the Dark Lord had ordered that he not be touched by anyone except Voldemort himself. Harry looked forward to seeing Malfoy punished by his own master.

“Crucio!” came Malfoy's malevolent cry.

Harry felt nothing; he sat for a second in confusion but bolted to his feet at Hermione's cries of anguish. He and Ron lunged frantically at the door to get at Malfoy. Hermione's screams drove Harry wild with fury. He wedged himself between two bars in a hopeless attempt to slip through them; Ron threw himself violently against the door over and over in a complete rage. Ron's screams were almost as terrible to hear as Hermione's.

A simple, but contemptible smile played on Malfoy's face as he watched Harry. He waved his wand slightly, continuing the torture. For almost a minute—though it seemed like hours—Harry's screams mingled with Hermione's and Ron's to form an awful song of unimaginable pain. Harry's vision was tinted red with anger and blood; his only emotion was pure hatred. He barely felt Ginny bump him as she flung herself at the bars.

“Malfoy, stop it! Leave her alone – I'm begging you,” she shrieked as she sank to her knees, sobbing.

Malfoy lifted his wand and stopped the curse. Ginny spun around and cradled Hermione in her arms.

“Well, that's one of you, at least,” said Malfoy. “Potter, Weasley. Stop struggling and listen me! If you don't, I'll start the curse again.”

Ron and Harry both forced themselves into stillness and glared murderously at

Malfoy.

“On your knees, Potter! Do it, you know the penalty otherwise.”

Harry dropped to his knees, his eyes never leaving Malfoy's. He tried to make some kind of mental connection with Malfoy, like Mars had done before, but it wouldn't work. He could only read Malfoy's mood, and it didn't take a seer to recognize the perverted happiness gleaming in Draco's eyes.

“You too, Weasley! Good, good. Now then, I want you both to say 'Kill me Draco, please',” demanded Malfoy, smiling. Crabbe and Goyle slapped hands and laughed stupidly.

“Say it!” screamed Malfoy.

After a long moment of silence from Harry and Ron, Malfoy spoke again. “Very well; you can imagine how much it pains me to torture a mudblood.”

Malfoy raised his wand. Harry and Ron both jumped in front of Hermione; Ginny screamed. Draco's incantation never came; instead, Harry heard a female voice casting a spell.

“Stupefy!” said the voice, and a red stunner flashed from near the door knocking Malfoy unconscious.

Crabbe and Goyle drew their wands and turned to the door, but nothing was there. Harry thought he could see a blur moving about the room, but neither flunky seemed to notice it. The blur stopped at the window and from there he again heard, “Stupefy!” Another red flash shot out and hit Crabbe full in the face; he fell over in a lump like Draco.

Goyle leaped into the air and fired a curse at the window, but the blur had moved again. Another female voice rang out, from the door again, and a much larger stunner streaked into the room and flattened Goyle. Harry saw Padma Patil standing at the door in her Ravenclaw robes.

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“Padma!” yelled Hermione, sitting up with Ginny's help.

“Are there anymore about?” asked an airy female voice in front of the cell door.

“No, they all left. Who is this?” said Harry.

“Amitto!” said the girl's voice.

Strands of dirty blond hair appeared in front of Ron. Luna's face then became visible, and immediately afterward her body followed suit. She was staring up into Ron's eyes.

“Luna?” said Ron in surprise.

“I told you I'd be there for you, Ronald.”

“Huh?”

“Alohomora,” she said and the cell door swung open.

Chapter Thirty – Battle for Hogwarts Castle



As Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione staggered out of the cage, Padma explained how she, Luna, and Neville had escaped from Ravenclaw Tower with the help of the three first years that Ron and Ginny had delivered earlier in the day. Luna had known enough glyphs to be able to tell the door to open, but they had needed to get Flitwick away for a few minutes.

Mary—the sneakiest first year in history, to hear Hermione tell it—had overheard Luna, Padma, and Neville worrying over how to distract Flitwick, and she and Heather had approached them to offer a diversion. The two first year girls pretended to fight over

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Mark Evans in a far corner of the dormitory. They apparently put on a good show, because they were quickly surrounded by a crowd of students cheering them on, and that brought Flitwick charging over to break it up. Meanwhile, Luna opened the door and the three slipped out, closing the door behind them.

“But Heather and Mary had a price, Ginny. I'm sorry, but they made me swear I'd do it before they would help,” said Padma apologetically.

“Do what?”

“I have to give you a message. Remember, it's not from me or Luna, but from those two brats.”

Ginny looked confused. “Okay...what is it, then?”

“Oh no,” squeaked Padma. “I could never say it in front of the boys.” She leaned close to Ginny and whispered into her ear. Ginny's eyes grew wide as Padma relayed her message. When the Ravenclaw prefect had finished, Ginny was flicking her wand in anger.

“Oh, I can't believe those two! If I get through this alive, I will personally make sure that they don't!” Ginny snarled.

“What did they say?” asked Hermione and Ron.

Ginny looked at Ron and blushed. She then called Hermione over and whispered the message in her ear. Hermione looked as enraged as Ginny.

“The nerve! Who do they think they are?” Hermione demanded.

“What did they say?” asked Harry.

Ginny looked up at Harry for a second and quickly looked away again, blushing.

“No, Harry, I'm sorry! I just can't tell you,” she said.

“But where's Neville?” asked Ron.

Luna and Padma exchanged troubled looks. Padma explained that Neville had suggested going up to Gryffindor Tower to retrieve Harry's Marauder's Map. Harry had

used the map in his fifth year to keep an eye out for teachers when he dismissed the members of Dumbledore's Army after meetings: the map showed a complete layout of Hogwarts and labeled every person's whereabouts within it.

"We needed it to find where you lot were," said Padma. "Once we saw that you were in the North Tower, we left your Common Room to find you, but ... but," said Padma, tears rolling down her face, "but a little while later we got attacked. Some crazy-looking Australian wizard hit Neville with a curse."

"No!" squeaked Hermione.

"He just keeled over. He wasn't moving; I couldn't see him breathing, but we had to run. There were five of them," Padma sniffed. "The carpet kept tripping them, and all the doors opened easily for me but closed in their faces, so it wasn't too hard to get away. But I feel so bad about leaving Neville." Padma choked back her tears and tried to put on a brave face.

"They would have tortured us to death if it hadn't been for you two and Neville," said Ginny, putting her arm around Padma.

"We can't stay here any longer, Harry," said Ron forcefully. "Voldemort is coming to this very room, remember?"

"Right," replied Harry. "But where do we go?"

"Mars' office," suggested Ginny. "I've heard him say it's the safest place in the Castle."

"Yeah, that's a good idea. I heard Dumbledore say the same thing. Plus, it's got that fireplace that can get us anywhere else around here if we need to run," said Harry.

"But that's on the other side of the Castle," Hermione pointed out anxiously.

"That's okay," said Harry as he started for the door. "There's a secret passage in an old storeroom near the Owlery that leads to the hallway his office is in."

"Yes, that's a good idea," said Padma, recovering herself a bit. "Mars is sure to

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look for us there once he's returned.”

Harry opened his mouth to tell Padma that Mars had fallen in combat, but a quick head shake from Hermione stayed his tongue. They retrieved their wands from the table and then looked at Malfoy and his thugs lying on the floor.

“What about these three idiots?” asked Ginny.

“I say toss 'em out the window,” suggested Ron.

“I'm with that!” agreed Harry, and he bent down and grabbed Malfoy's feet.

“Wait! It's a seventy foot drop,” said Hermione.

“That should be high enough, Hermione,” said Ron as he picked up Malfoy's arms.

“Ron, that's murder!” said Hermione, aghast.

“No it's not, it's an execution. C'mon, Harry.”

“NO! Executions require a trial, Ron.”

“Did you forget what he just did to you? Forget they were gonna torture and kill all of us until Padma and Luna came along?”

“No, I didn't, but you're a better man than him, Ron,” said Hermione. She put her hands on his shoulders. “You don't kill people in cold blood, I know you better than that.”

“Fine!” said Ron, dropping Malfoy's hands and letting Malfoy's head bounce hard off the stone floor. “But if I see him walking around again I'm taking him out, no warnings. Understand?”

Hermione nodded and hugged Ron fiercely, burying her head in his chest. Ron put his arms around her and shook his head at Harry. Harry knew Ron was thinking the same thing he was: “How did we just blow a chance to kill these three?”

When Hermione let go of Ron, she bent down and fished her hands through Malfoy's robes. When she finally stood, Harry saw that she was holding Mars' S.P.E.W. badge. She looked at it sadly for a second, then quickly pocketed it as Luna and Padma joined her.

Harry and Ginny led them out of the room and down the corridor toward the staircase that would take them to the Owlery. A few minutes later, Harry stopped.

“I don't believe it,” he said crossly.

“What?”

“This staircase hasn't moved in three years, and today it's shifted.”

“It must have something to do with the castle's defenses being activated,” suggested Hermione.

“Probably, but now we have to go down two flights first and then use two different sets of stairs to get to the right level,” said Harry gloomily as he turned 180 degrees and started walking back the way they came.

“This is the way that Voldemort will use, you know,” said Ginny as they walked.

“I know, but it's the only way, with those stairs gone,” he replied.

“Well then, Luna and I should scout ahead,” said Ginny, and she called Luna up to the front. Harry was about to ask her why when both girls tapped their heads with their wands and said “Abscondo!” They slowly blended into the background from top to bottom.

“Don't worry Harry, I know the way. C'mon, Luna,” said the blur that was Ginny. Both blurs moved quickly down the hall.

Harry led the remainder of his group after the blurs back to the stairs, where they went down two levels. They had started walking down the next hallway when a voice whispered, “Hold up.” It was Luna.

“The way is clear until you get to the old ball room, the one with the balcony. We found a Death Eater there that was, well, not living. Ginny went ahead past the Divination classroom, and I came back to report.”

Harry looked at Ron, who nodded, and then turned back to where he thought Luna was standing. “Any idea what killed him?”

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“No, Nothing seemed amiss.”

Harry shrugged and continued down the hall. They exited the corridor into a large room, where Harry could see the Death Eater Luna had referred to lying on the floor. To his right was a gigantic statue of the Ravenclaw eagle, in front of three large pillars that supported a balcony two floors above. He recognized this room as the one in which he and Ron had seen Mars confront his boggart; Harry fought hard to push the memory from his mind.

“Ron, what's wrong?” asked Hermione.

“Nuthin'...I just hate this room,” Ron answered glumly.

They crossed the ballroom carefully and entered the corridor leading to Professor Trelawney's classroom. Shortly they heard footsteps approaching rapidly, but saw no one. The group raised their wands and spread out from each other.

“Don't jinx! It's me,” came Ginny's voice loudly.

“Ginny, keep your voice –”

“Harry, it's *him*!” said Ginny. Harry felt her clutch the front of his robes.

“Voldemort?”

“Yes, and he's got that awful Reynolds wizard with him. They're coming up the stairs. We can't go that way!” she said frantically.

Harry turned around and ordered, “Back to the ballroom!” They hurried back to the large room.

“We can't go back upstairs because there's no longer another way out, and of course that's where Voldemort's headed,” said Harry. “This hallway over here doesn't go anywhere near where we want, but it's the only other way out of this blasted ballroom.” He led them toward the corridor on the right wall.

As they hurried down the hall, Harry wracked his brain, trying to work out the best route to Mars' office. All of the paths seemed either too long or too vulnerable to

discovery.

“Harry, I think something's moving up there,” said the still near-invisible Ginny. He looked up and saw four masked Death Eaters ahead in the hallway. There were also six other wizards, without the foul masks, walking in front of them.

They were trapped! Harry thought. Any second now, those wizards would see them.

Suddenly, two suits of armor leaped in front of the oncoming wizards, each bludgeoning the lead wizard with a mace. Screams and curses echoed down the hallway.

While the enchanted armor had given them a brief respite, Harry knew their options were all bad. Every direction open to them was a path to death except ...

“The balcony!” he whispered. “Turn around!” he said to the rest as he quickly squeezed past them.

“But, Harry, *he's* going there—” Ginny protested.

“Just follow me, hurry!” he snapped, breaking into a run.

“IT'S POTTER! HE'S ESCAPED!!!”

Harry had hoped the armor would cover their flight from this group of wizards, but he didn't dwell on the bad luck. All his thoughts were now concentrated on reaching the pillars of that balcony before Voldemort entered the old ballroom.

He heard the footsteps of their pursuers behind them. He didn't dare look back to see how much of a lead they had. In the ballroom, Harry sprinted towards the eagle statue, risking a quick glance around. There was no sign of Reynolds or Voldemort yet. They stopped at the eagle statue in front of the pillars.

“That balcony,” said Harry gasping for breath as he pointed upwards, “is the level we need to reach. I should have thought of it before.”

“But how do we get up there?” asked Ron.

“Spider Climb charm. Luna, Ginny you, go first,” said Harry as he turned around

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and positioned himself behind the base of the statue. Padma, Hermione and Ron took up similar stances behind the pillars while Luna and Ginny shinnied up the pillars with the help of the Spider Climb charm.

“Harry, we're up top!” came Ginny's voice from above a moment later.

“Look around, make sure it's clear. See if the staircase to the next level is still there,” shouted Harry.

“Stupefy!” cried Ron.

Harry turned and saw that the the three of the wizards had just entered the ballroom. None were wearing the foul masks. Ron had stunned one of the three wizards, and Padma fired a stunner at the remaining two, but they managed to block it with a shield charm.

“Silencio!” cried Hermione, popping out from behind her pillar.

The two wizards instantly pointed their wands at her and gestured, but no sound or spell was produced.

Harry yelled to his friends, “Climb now, before the rest come out! Stay on the backsides until you get to the railings.”

“Araneus Scando!” he heard his friends say behind him as he turned back to the wizards. The two that Hermione had silenced were no longer visible, and curses were flying out of the hallway at Hermione as she climbed the center pillar. She was safely shielded at the moment, but when she got to the railing she would be in plain sight and a sitting duck. The wizards were too far back in the hallway for Harry to target them at his present angle, so he couldn't stop them from throwing curses at her. He could, however, grant her some cover.

When he saw that Hermione was a few feet from the top, Harry aimed his wand in front of the doorway and cried, “Fumio Tectum!”

Scores of tiny explosions started going off in front of the entrance of the far

hallway. Smoke rose from the floor and quickly formed a dense wall, obscuring all visibility between the hall and the room.

Harry looked up and saw Ron lifting Hermione over the railing. He smiled to himself and was reaching for the nearest pillar when he heard a shout:

“Avada Kedavra!”

A green light flashed up at the balcony, hitting the railing right next to Hermione. Several feet of the rail exploded, sending debris raining thirty-five feet down to the stone floor. Hermione screamed, Ron roughly snatched her the rest of the way over the rails, and the two fell to the floor of the balcony above.

Harry looked back across the ballroom floor and saw that one of the Death Eaters had ventured through the wall of smoke.

“Stupefy!” cried Harry.

His red stunner zipped across the room, sending the Death Eater reeling to the floor. Six more people came out of the smoke behind him; all of them had their wands aimed at Harry. He quickly jumped back behind the base of the statue. A split second later, six stunning spells slammed into the statue, causing it to wobble dangerously.

Harry wasn't sure what to do. There simply wasn't time for him to climb the pillars, and Harry had never managed to go any higher than thirty feet with the jumping charm in class.

“Still,” he thought, “I never had this kind of motivation before!”

Six more stunners slammed into the statue; parts of it flew off in all directions.

Harry gritted his teeth and gripped his wand tightly. He wanted a few extra seconds without interruption to make sure he could cast the best possible jumping spell. Again the statue wobbled as more stunners hit it. Harry knew the wizards were closing in on him. He also knew the spell that would give him the time he wanted. He was ready to try it right after their next volley.

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WHAM

The spells hit; the statue split in two and fell to either side, leaving Harry completely out in the open.

If Harry was to survive, his next two spells would have to be the best of his life.

“Give me your hand!” demanded Ron.

Hermione stretched out her hand and he grabbed it. Quickly Ron hauled her to the top of the rail. Just as Hermione cleared the top, a green flash hit the railing right beside her and exploded.

“AAAaaaaieeeeeeee!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

She felt Ron snatch her roughly over the last part, and the two of them landed hard on the balcony's floor.

“Stupefy!” an unknown female voice screeched from ahead of them.

Hermione rolled over onto her stomach and saw Padma dueling a witch in the room that connected to the balcony. The witch's stunner hit a shining silver shield that shimmered in front of her friend. The collision produced a deep, resonating gong that echoed off the walls of the room.

Hermione pushed herself to her feet and started running after Ron, who was already sprinting in front of her. They charged into the room to get a clearer shot at the witch. Padma's shield was keeping the witch's hexes off, but the witch was a faster spell-caster and easily blocked Padma's attacks.

“*You're* not Potter, nor a Weasley!” snarled the witch. She jabbed her wand at Padma and cried, “Avada Kedavra!”

The green flash shattered Padma's shield, but Padma had already hit the floor when she heard the incantation, and so was spared.

“Stupefy!” cried Ron, who now had a clear shot at the witch.

With amazing deftness, the witch blocked the charm and snapped a retaliatory stunner back at Ron. The counterattack had been so quick that he had no time to produce his own shield, and he was thrown backwards by the spell—right into Hermione. Ron knocked Hermione back with him to the floor.

The witch's malevolent eyes flicked back and forth between the two girls, then she pointed her wand at Padma. Padma was on her knees, about to cast another shield charm, when a voice rang out – “Petrificus Totalus!”

The witch froze suddenly and then teetered a bit, falling backwards to the floor with her arm and wand sticking straight up.

“Hermione! Is Ron okay?” cried Ginny's voice.

“Just stunned, Ginny,” Hermione replied as she stood shakily. Hermione heard Ginny say “Ennervate!” Ron then moaned a bit as he moved.

“Padma, are you all right?” Hermione asked. The Ravenclaw, now standing, nodded at her.

“Ron, get up! I know you're woozy, but we have no time,” said Ginny's disembodied voice. Ron's left arm raised stiffly in the air, and his head and shoulders bobbed up and down. “C'mon, Ron!”

“Okay, okay, I'm getting up,” said Ron irritably as he stood with Ginny's help.

“The way is clear,” said Ginny excitedly. “I think Luna is already in the room with the secret passage Harry told us about. There's just one spot we have to secure up ahead.”

“But Ginny, Harry's still down in the ballroom,” said Hermione.

“I know,” said Ginny worriedly. “But if we don't get someone watching this corridor, they could come up right behind us.”

“W'VE FOUND THEM!”

Hermione looked up. Two masked wizards had entered the room; both immediately pointed their wands at Ron. “Impedementia!” they cried.

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Even though both hexes were aimed right at Ron, he seemed unaffected. After a split-second's shocked delay, Ron flicked his wand at the wizards, shouting, "Stupefy!" Ron's red stunner was joined by two larger rays from the wands of Padma and Hermione. One of the Death Eaters managed a hasty shield charm, but it was overwhelmed by the three spells, and both wizards were knocked to the floor.

"Ginny must be right about that hallway. I'll go watch it while you two check on Harry," said Ron, stepping toward the door.

On Ron's second step he tripped over something and tumbled to the floor.

"Ron!" squealed Hermione. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah...I think I tripped over Ginny."

Hermione looked at the floor carefully and tried to detect where the disillusioned Ginny was lying. She thought the floor looked a bit discolored a few feet behind Ron. Hermione was working her way carefully to the spot when Padma screamed.

Hermione raised her wand, turning toward Padma, but her vision suddenly went black. Padma's screaming and the curses from the battle raging below faded to silence. The only sound she could hear was a foul rattling somewhere in the cloud of darkness that surrounded her.

Her wand trembled in her hand and an iciness built up in her lungs. Breathing was no longer natural; she had to consciously force the air in and out of her chest. Mist formed from her breath. Hermione forced herself to look around for any sign of the horror she knew lurked nearby: a dementor of Azkaban.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" roared Ron, and a brilliant white-silver light flashed out.

Ron was now visible to her as a silhouette, lit by his gleaming charm. He had not conjured a corporeal patronus, but his powerful silvery ray was forcing away the dementor in front of him. Hermione saw Ron's jaw clench, and his charm grew brighter.

The power and glow of the spell rekindled what little hope was left in her heart. Her fear began to recede, until she saw another dementor behind Ron – its ghoulish arm reached out of its cloak to grab his wand arm. Ron screamed in utter terror, and the light of his patronus fizzled, out plunging Hermione back into darkness.

“RON!” she shrieked hysterically.

Hermione leaped towards Ron frantically, but something grabbed her by the hair and snapped her head painfully backwards. She was numb with fear as the hooded head of the dementor moved over her. Its rancid breath felt as cold as death itself as it blew over her face. She tried to raise her wand, but her arm wouldn't listen. A voice echoed in her head, a voice she had not heard since she was seven.

“Are you going to follow me around the entire day?”

The voice was not annoyed, but amused. He was standing chest deep in water, looking at a dark, curly haired young girl facing him on the beach.

“As long as you insist on being stupid, I will! They said on the telly that the rip tides are very dangerous today. You can swim tomorrow. Please come out,” begged the young Hermione.

“I swear, you are about the naggiest little sister in England,” the teenager smiled at the girl. “I'll just swim out to the buoy and back, then we can go get some ice cream. Will that do?”

The girl bit her lip and stared nervously at her brother. Still smiling, he shook his head and turned around. He disappeared quickly under the water. She never saw him alive again.

Hermione felt the cold foul breath on her face. The vision was gone; she saw the dementor slowly pull back its hood to reveal its awful face. It had empty scabbed-over sockets in place of eyes, and a gaping maw for a mouth that rattled horribly as it breathed in and out. Its head lowered. Hermione heard an eleven-year-old Ron say, "It's no wonder

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no one can stand her, she's a nightmare, honestly." His words repeated over and over as the dementor bent for the kiss.

"Expecto Patronum!" came a girl's voice from far away.

A silver light flashed in front of Hermione's face, and the dementor dropped her to the floor. The beam pushed the fiend away from her until it finally retreated and flew off. Hermione looked to see who had saved her, but no one appeared to be standing in the area the spell had come from.

"Expecto Patronum!" cried Luna's voice again. Hermione could now make out Luna's disillusioned form as another silver beam shot from her wand and into one of the two dementors that were bent over Ron, trying to pull Ron's hands from his face.

Hermione quickly located her wand on the floor and snatched it up. As she stood, she heard a woman cry, "Stupefy!" The witch Ginny had cursed had recovered and tried to stun Luna.

"Impedimentia!" shouted Luna from a different part of the room. The witch shifted her direction and blocked the curse.

Hermione left Luna to duel the witch on her own, because the second dementor had returned to Ron. The dementors had now managed to remove his hands and tilt his head back. One was dangerously close to performing its kiss.

Hermione cleared her mind of distractions and concentrated on her happiest thought. Twelve OWLs!

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" she cried, pointing her wand at Ron's attackers.

A silvery otter shot out the end of her wand and flew straight into the face of the dementor over Ron's face. The fiend flew backwards and then glided away in retreat. The otter patronus looped in the air and attacked the other dementor, pushing it away from Ron and routing it completely.

"Back here! Help Padma!" screamed Hermione, pointing with her wand. The

patronus wheeled about and flew around Hermione.

This dementor was not trying to kiss Padma. Instead, it stood above her, sucking out her happiness as she sobbed on the floor. Hermione's patronus slammed into it, pushing it off the balcony. The fiend then skulked away like the others.

Hermione heard a popping noise and a squeal of pain from Luna. She forgot about her patronus and raised her wand to confront the witch, but the Death Eater was ready for her. Before Hermione even got the woman in her sight, she was hit with a disarming charm, and her wand flew from her hand.

“Ah, you're that mudblood friend of Potter's, aren't you?” sneered the witch. Hermione turned to face her.

“No need to keep you alive, is there?” said the witch, her wand pointed at Hermione's heart.

“This is it,” Hermione thought. “No wand, too close to dodge and everyone else is down.”

Her eyes drifted to Ron laying on the floor at her feet. His head moved a little, and his unfocused eyes stared up at her.

“Last chance,” she thought.

“I love you Ron Weasley, you great prat,” she said quietly and smiled at him.

“Very touching,” said the witch, raising her wand. “Goodbye, mudblood,”

A cry of “DISPLACIO!” from below was followed by screams and crashes. Both Hermione and the witch jerked their heads to look over at the balcony. A loud noise from below seemed to be getting closer.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAahhhhhhhhhhhhh!” screamed Harry as he flew up like he had been shot from a cannon. He cleared the railing easily, landing catlike on his feet, facing Hermione and the witch.

“Harry Potter!” exclaimed the witch, staring dumbfounded at him.

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Harry elected to skip the greeting and go directly to the jinx: his only response was, “Stupefy!” His red stunner streaked across the room and flattened the witch.

Padma explained to them that she, Luna and Neville had escaped from Ravenclaw Tower with the help of the three first years that Ron and Ginny had delivered earlier in the day. Luna knew how to read enough of the glyphs to tell the door to open, but they needed to get Flitwick away for a few minutes.

Apparently Mary, the sneakiest first year in history according to Hermione, had overheard them and later they were approached by Heather offering help with a diversion. The two first year girls pretended to get in a fight over Mark Evans in a place as far from the entrance as possible. They apparently put on a good show, because the two were soon surrounded by many students cheering them on and that brought Flitwick charging over to break it up. Luna opened the door and the three slipped out closing the door behind them.

“But Heather and Mary had a price Ginny. I'm sorry but they made me swear I'd do it before they'd help,” said Padma apologetically.

“Do what?”

“I have to give you a message. Remember, it's not from me or Luna, but from those two brats.”

Ginny looked confused and then replied, “Okay what is it then?”

“Oh no,” squeaked Padma. “I could never say it in front of the boys.”

Padma then leaned very close to Ginny and whispered into her ear. Ginny's eyes grew progressively wider as Padma relayed her message. When the Ravenclaw prefect withdrew her head, Ginny had her wand out and was flicking it with anger.

“Oh, I can't believe those two! If I get through this alive, I will personally make sure that they don't!” said Ginny snarling.

“What did they say?” asked Hermione and Ron.

Ginny looked at Ron and blushed. She called Hermione over and whispered the message in her ear. Hermione looked as enraged as Ginny had.

“The nerve! Who do they think they are?” Hermione demanded.

“What did they say?” asked Harry.

Ginny looked up at Harry and after a second of eye contact a look of fright crossed her face.

“No Harry, I'm sorry I just can't tell you,” she said as she averted her eyes.

“But where's Neville?” asked Ron.

Luna and Padma exchanged sad looks. Padma explained that Neville had suggested they go up to Gryffindor Tower and retrieve Harry's Marauder's Map. Harry had used the map in his fifth year to keep an eye out for teachers when he dismissed the members of Dumbledore's Army after meetings. The map showed a complete layout of Hogwarts and labeled every person in it.

“We needed it to find where you lot were,” said Padma. “Once we saw that you were in the North Tower we left your Common Room to find you, but ... but,” said Padma as tears rolled down her face. “But a little while later we were attacked. Some crazy looking Australian wizard hit Neville with a curse.”

“No!” squeaked Hermione.

“He just keeled over. He wasn't moving; I couldn't see him breathing, but we had to run. There were five of them,” said Padma pausing for a sniff. “The carpet kept tripping them and all the doors opened easily for me, but were stuck for them so it wasn't too hard to get away. But I feel so bad about leaving Neville.”

Padma wiped away her remaining tears and put on her bravest face.

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“They would have tortured us to death if it hadn't been for you two and Neville,” said Ginny as she put her arm around Padma.

“We can't stay here any longer Harry,” said Ron forcefully. “Voldemort is coming to this very room remember?”

“Right,” replied Harry. “But where do we go?”

“Mars' office,” suggested Ginny. “I've heard him say it's the safest place in the Castle.”

“Yeah, that's a good idea. I heard Dumbledore say the same thing. Plus it's got that fireplace that can get us anywhere else if we need to run,” said Harry.

“But that's on the other side of the Castle,” added Hermione anxiously.

“That's okay,” said Harry as he started for the door. “There's a old storeroom near the Owlery that has a secret passage in it that leads to the same hallway as his office.”

“Yes, that is a good idea,” said Padma who had recovered a bit. “Mars is sure to look for us there once he's returned.”

Harry started to tell Padma about Mars' fall in combat, but a quick head shake from Hermione stayed his tongue. They retrieved their wands from the table and then looked at Malfoy and his thugs lying on the floor.

“What about these three idiots?” asked Ginny.

“I say toss'em out the window,” suggested Ron.

“I'm with that!” agreed Harry. He bent down and grabbed Malfoy's feet.

“Wait! It's a seventy foot drop,” said Hermione.

“That should be high enough, Hermione,” said Ron as he picked up Malfoy's arms.

“Ron, that's murder!” said Hermione aghast.

“No it's not, it's an execution. C'mon Harry.”

“NO! Executions require a trial, Ron.”

“Did you forget what he just did to you? Forget about the fate that awaited us all

until Padma and Luna came along?”

“No I didn't, but you're a better man than him Ron,” said Hermione. She walked up to Ron and put her hands on his shoulders. “You don't kill people in cold blood, I know you better than that.”

“Fine!” spat Ron, dropping Malfoy's hands and letting his head bounce hard off the stone floor. “But if I see him walking around again, I'm taking him out, no warnings. Understand?”

Hermione nodded and hugged Ron around his chest as she buried her head in it. Ron put his arms around her and shook his head at Harry. Harry knew Ron was thinking the same as he, “How did we just blow a chance to kill these three?”

Hermione let go of Ron and bent down and fished her hands through Malfoy's robes. When she stood Harry saw she was holding the SPEW badge that had been taken from Mars. She looked at it sadly for a second, but quickly pocketed it when Luna and Padma walked over.

Harry and Ginny led them out of the room and down the corridor that went to the staircase they needed to reach the Owlery. After walking for a few minutes Harry stopped.

“I don't believe it,” he said crossly.

“What?”

“This staircase hasn't moved in three years, and today it's shifted.”

“It must have something to do with the castle's defenses being activated,” suggested Hermione.

“Probably, but now we have to go down two flights first and then use two different sets of stairs to get to the right level,” said Harry gloomily as he turned 180 degrees and started walking back the way they came.

“We're going the way that Voldemort will use you know,” said Ginny as they

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walked.

“I know, but its the only way with those stairs gone,” Harry replied.

“Well then, Luna and I should scout ahead,” said Ginny. She called Luna up to the front.

Harry was about to ask her why that was a good idea, when both girls tapped their heads with their wands and said “Abscondo!” They slowly blended into the background from top to bottom.

“Don't worry Harry, I know the way. C'mon Luna,” said Ginny the blur.

Harry watched both blurs move quickly down the hall. He lead the remainder of his group back to the stairs and went down two levels. They were walking down a hall when a voice whispered, “Hold up.” It was Luna.

“The way is clear until you get to the old ball room, the one with the balcony. There we found a Death Eater, that was well, not living. Ginny has gone ahead past the Divination classroom and I came back to report.”

Harry looked at Ron, who nodded, and turned back to where he thought Luna was standing, “Any idea what killed him?”

“No, Nothing seemed amiss.”

Harry shrugged and started down the hall. They exited a corridor into a large room where Harry saw the Death Eater that Luna had referred to lying on the floor. To his right he saw a gigantic statue of the Ravenclaw eagle in front of three large pillars that supported a balcony two floors above. He now recognized this room as the one in which he and Ron had seen Mars confront his boggart – Harry fought very hard to push the memory out of his mind.

“Ron, what's wrong?” asked Hermione.

“Nuthin', I just hate this room,” Ron answered.

They crossed the ballroom carefully and entered the corridor that lead to Professor

Trelawney's classroom. Soon they heard footsteps rapidly approaching, but could not see anyone. The group raised their wands and spread out from each other.

“Don't jinx! It's me,” came Ginny's voice rather loudly.

“Ginny, keep your voice –”

“Harry, it's *him!*” said Ginny. He felt her clutching the front of his robes.

“Voldemort?”

“Yes, and he's got that awful Reynolds wizard with him. They're coming up the stairs. We can't go that way!” Ginny said frantically.

Harry turned around and ordered, “Back to the ballroom!”

They hurried back to the large room.

“We can't go back upstairs because there's no longer another way out and of course that's where Voldemort's headed,” said Harry. “This hallway doesn't go anywhere near where we want, but it's the only other way out of this blasted ballroom.”

He then led them toward the corridor on the right wall.

As they hurried down the hall, Harry racked his brain trying to think of the best route to Mars' office. All of the paths seemed either too long or too easy to be spotted.

“Harry, I think something's moving up there,” said the still nigh invisible Ginny.

He looked up and saw four masked Death Eaters ahead in the hall. There were also six other wizards without the foul masks walking in front of them.

They were trapped Harry thought. Any second now those wizards would see them.

Two suits of armor then suddenly leaped in front of the oncoming wizards, each bludgeoning the lead wizard with a mace. Screams and curses echoed down the hallway.

While they were given some respite by the enchanted armor, Harry knew their options were all bad. Every direction open to them was a path to death except ...

“The balcony!” he whispered. “Turn around!” Harry said to the rest as he quickly squeezed past them.

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“But Harry *he's* going there ...”

“Just follow me, hurry!” Harry snapped, braking into a run.

“IT'S POTTER! HE'S ESCAPED!!!”

Harry had hoped the armor would cover their flight from these particular wizards, but he didn't dwell on the bad luck. All his thoughts were now concentrated on reaching the pillars of that balcony before Voldemort entered the old ballroom.

He could hear the footsteps of their pursuers. Harry didn't dare look back to check if their lead would be enough for his plan to work. When they reached the ballroom he continued sprinting, but still managed to glance around. There was no sign of Reynolds or Voldemort. They stopped once they reached the eagle statue in front of the pillars.

“That balcony,” said Harry gasping for breath as he pointed upwards. “Is the level we need to reach. I should have thought of it before.”

“But how do we get up there?” asked Ron.

“Spider Climb Charm. Luna, Ginny you go first,” said Harry. He turned and positioned himself behind the base of the statue. Padma, Hermione and Ron and all took up similar stances behind the pillars.

“Harry, we're up top!” came Ginny's voice from above ten or so seconds later.

“Look around, make sure it's clear. See if the staircase to the next level is still there,” shouted Harry.

“Stupefy!” cried Ron's voice.

Harry turned and saw that Ron had stunned one of the three wizards who had just entered the ballroom. None were wearing the foul masks. Padma then fired a stunner at the remaining two, but they managed to block it with a shield charm.

“Silencio!” cried Hermione as she popped out from behind the pillar.

The two wizards instantly pointed their wands at her and made some movements with them, but no sound or spell was produced.

Harry yelled out to his friends, "Climb the pillars now, before the rest come out. Stay on the far side until you get to the railings."

"Araneus Scando!" he heard the three of them say behind him.

Harry looked back for the wizards and noticed the two that had been silenced were no longer visible, however, curses were now flying out of the hallway at Hermione as she climbed the center pillar. She was safely shielded at the moment, but when she got to the railing, she would have to venture to the front of the pillar where she would be a sitting duck. The wizards were too far back in the hallway for Harry to target them at his present angle, so he couldn't stop them from throwing curses at her. He could, however, grant her some cover.

When Harry saw that Hermione was a few feet from the top, he aimed his wand in front of the doorway and cried "Fumio Tectum!"

Scores of tiny explosions started going off in front of the entrance of the far hallway. Smoke began rising from the floor and it quickly formed a dense wall completely obscuring any visibility between the hall and the room.

Harry looked up and saw Ron lifting Hermione over the railing. He smiled to himself and started to walk to the nearest pillar when he heard a shout:

"Avada Kedavra!"

A green light flashed up at the balcony hitting the railing right next to Hermione. It exploded several feet of the rail, sending debris raining down thirty-five feet to the stone floor. Hermione screamed and Ron roughly snatched her the rest of the way over the rails and the two then fell to the floor of the balcony above.

Harry looked back across the ballroom floor and saw that one of the Death Eaters had ventured past the wall of smoke.

"Stupefy!" cried Harry.

His red stunner zipped across the room sending the Death Eater reeling to the floor.

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Harry now saw six more people coming out of the smoke wall and all of them had their wands aimed at him. He quickly jumped back behind the base of the statue. A split second later six stunning spells slammed into the statue and its base causing it to wobble dangerously.

He wasn't sure what he could do. There simply wasn't time for him to climb the pillars and even though Harry had been by far the best jumper in class; he had never managed to go any higher than thirty feet with the jumping charm.

“Still”, he thought “I never had this kinda motivation to make me jump.”

Six more stunners slammed into the statue and parts of it flew off in all directions.

Harry gritted his teeth and gripped his wand tightly. He wanted a few extra seconds without interruption to make sure he cast the best jumping spell he could. Again the statue wobbled as the stunners hit it. Harry knew the wizards were closing in on him. He also knew the spell that would give him the time he wanted. He was ready to try it right after their next volley.

WHAM

The spells hit, the statue split in two and fell to either side leaving Harry completely out in the open.

If Harry was to survive, his next two spells would have to be best of his life.

Hermione

“Give me your hand!” demanded Ron.

Hermione stretched out her hand and he grabbed it. Quickly she felt Ron hauling her up over the rail. Just as Hermione was clearing the top a green flash hit the railing right beside her and exploded.

“AAAAaaaieeeeeeee!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

She felt Ron snatch her roughly over the last part and the two of them then landed very hard on the balcony's floor.

“Stupefy!” screeched an unknown female voice from up ahead.

Hermione rolled over onto her stomach and saw a witch dueling with Padma in the room that was connected to the balcony. The stunner hit a shining silver shield that was shimmering in front of her friend. The collision produced a deep resonating gong-like note that echoed off the walls of the room.

Hermione pushed herself up to her feet and started running after Ron, who was already sprinting several feet in front of her. They charged into the room in order to get a clearer shot at the witch. Padma's shield was keeping the hexes off of her, but the other witch was a much faster spell caster and easily blocked her attacks.

“You're not Potter nor a Weasley!” snarled the witch at Padma. She then jabbed her wand and cried “Avada Kedavra!”

The green flash shattered Padma's shield, but Padma had dived to the floor when she heard the incantation and was spared.

“Stupefy!” cried Ron, who now had a clear shot at the witch.

With simply amazing quickness the witch blocked the charm and snapped off a retaliatory stunner back at Ron. The counterattack had been so quick that he had no time to produce his own shield and was thrown backwards by the spell – right into Hermione. The far larger Ron knocked Hermione back with him onto the floor.

The witch's malevolent eyes flicked back and forth between the two girls and then she pointed her wand at Padma. Padma was on her knees and looked to be casting another shield charm when a voice rang out – “Petrificus Totalus!”

The witch froze suddenly and then teetered a bit, at last falling backwards to the floor with her arm and wand sticking straight up.

“Hermione! Is Ron okay?” cried out the voice of Ginny.

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“Just stunned Ginny,” Hermione replied as she stood.

Hermione then heard Ginny say “Ennervate!” Ron then moaned a bit as he moved.

“Padma, are you all right?” Hermione asked.

The Ravenclaw, who was now standing, nodded at her.

“Ron get up! I know you're woozy, but we have no time,” said Ginny's disembodied voice.

Ron's left arm then raised stiffly in the air and his head and shoulders bobbed up and down.

“C'mon Ron!”

“Okay, okay I'm getting up,” said Ron irritably as he stood with Ginny's help.

“The way is clear,” said Ginny excitedly. “I think Luna is already in the room with the secret passage that Harry spoke about. There's just one spot we have to secure up ahead.”

“But Ginny, Harry's still down in the ballroom,” said Hermione.

“I know,” said a worried Ginny. “But if we don't get someone watching this corridor they could come up right behind us.”

“W'VE FOUND THEM!” shouted a voice.

Hermione looked up and saw that two masked wizards had entered the room, both immediately pointed their wands at Ron.

“Impedementia!” they cried.

Even though both hexes were aimed right at Ron, he seemed unaffected. After a split second delay from shock, Ron flicked his wand at the wizards shouting, “Stupefy!”

Ron's red stunner was joined by two larger rays shot from the wands of Padma and Hermione. One of the Death Eaters did manage a shield charm, but it was overwhelmed by the three spells and both wizards were knocked to the floor.

“Ginny must be right about that hallway. I'll go watch it while you two check on

Harry,” said Ron as he took a step toward the door.

On Ron's second step he tripped over something and tumbled to the floor.

“Ron!” squealed Hermione. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I think I tripped over Ginny.”

Hermione looked at the floor carefully as she tried to detect where the disillusioned Ginny was lying. She thought the floor looked a bit discolored a few feet behind where Ron was now standing up. Hermione started to walk over to the spot when she heard Padma scream.

Hermione raised her wand and turned toward Padma, but her vision then suddenly went black. Padma's screaming and the curses from the battle raging below no longer made any noise. The only sound she could now hear was a foul rattling somewhere in the cloud of darkness that surrounded her.

Her wand trembled in her hand as Hermione felt an iciness building up in her lungs. Breathing was no longer natural, she had to consciously force the air in and out of her chest. Mist formed from her breath as Hermione forced herself to look around for any sign of the horror she knew lurked nearby, a dementor of Azkaban.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!” roared Ron and a brilliant white-silver light flashed out.

Ron was now visible to her as a silhouette lit by his gleaming charm. He had not conjured a corporeal patronus, but his powerful silvery ray was forcing away the dementor in front of him. Hermione saw Ron's jaw clench and his charm grew brighter. The power and glow of the spell rekindled what little hope she had left in her heart. Her fear began to recede until she saw that another dementor was behind Ron – it's ghoulisish arm then reached out of its cloak and grabbed his wand arm. Ron screamed in utter terror and the light of his patronus fizzled out plunging Hermione back into darkness.

“RON!” she shrieked hysterically.

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Hermione leaped at Ron frantically, but something had grabbed her by the hair and snapped her head painfully backwards. She was numb with fear as the hooded head of the dementor moved over her. Its rancid breath felt as cold as death itself as it blew over her face. She tried to raise her wand, but her arm wouldn't listen. A voice was then in her head, a voice she had not heard since she was seven.

“Are you going to follow me around the entire day?”

The voice not annoyed, but amused. He was standing chest deep in water looking at a dark, curly haired young girl facing him on the beach.

“As long as you insist on being stupid I will! They said on the telly that the rip tides are very dangerous today. You can swim tomorrow. Please come out,” begged the young Hermione.

“I swear, you are about the naggiest little sister in England,” said the teenager smiling at the girl. “I'll just swim out to the buoy and back, then we can go get some ice cream. Will that do?”

The girl bit her lip and stared nervously at her brother. Still smiling, he shook his head and turned around. He then disappeared quickly under the water. She would never see him alive again.

Hermione again felt the cold foul breath on her face. The vision was gone and she now saw the dementor slowly pull back its hood and reveal its awful face above her. It had empty scabbed over sockets in place of eyes and a gaping maw for a mouth that rattled horribly as it breathed air in and out. It began to lower its head. Hermione then heard an eleven year old Ron say, "It's no wonder no one can stand her, she's a nightmare, honestly." His words were repeated over and over again as the dementor neared her for the kiss.

“Expecto Patronum!” came a girl's voice from a seemingly far off place.

A silver light flashed in front of Hermione's face and the dementor dropped her to

the floor. She saw the beam push the fiend away from her until it finally retreated and flew off. Hermione looked to see who had saved her, but no one appeared to be standing where the spell had come from.

“Expecto Patronum!” cried Luna's voice.

Hermione could now make out Luna's disillusioned form as another silver beam shot from her wand and into one of the dementors trying to pull Ron's hands from his face.

Hermione quickly located her wand on the floor and snatched it up. As she stood she heard a woman cry “Stupefy!”

The witch Ginny cursed had recovered and tried to stun Luna.

“Impedimentia!” shouted Luna from different part of the room.

The witch shifted her facing and quickly blocked the curse.

Hermione had to leave Luna to duel the witch on her own, because the second dementor had returned to Ron. They had now managed to remove his hands and tilt his head back. One was dangerously close to performing its kiss.

Hermione cleared her mind of distractions and concentrated on her happiest thought, Twelve OWLs!

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!” she cried pointing her wand at Ron's attackers.

A silvery otter shot out the end of her wand and flew straight into the face of the dementor leaning close to Ron. The fiend flew backwards and then glided away in retreat. The otter patronus then looped in the air and attacked the other dementor pushing it away from Ron and eventually routing it completely.

“Back here! Help Padma!” screamed Hermione pointing with her wand.

The patronus wheeled about and flew around Hermione.

This dementor was not trying to kiss Padma. It was instead standing above her, and sucking out her happiness as she sobbed on the floor. Hermione's patronus slammed into

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it and pushed the dementor off the balcony. The fiend then glided away like the others.

Hermione heard a popping noise and then the sound of Luna squealing in pain. She forgot about the patronus and raised her wand for confronting the witch, but the Death Eater was ready for her. Before Hermione ever got the woman in her sight she had been hit with a disarming charm and her wand flew from her hand.

“Ah, you're that mudblood friend of Potter's aren't you?” sneered the witch.

Hermione turned to face her.

“No need to keep you alive is there?” said the witch with her wand pointed at Hermione's heart.

“This is it,” Hermione thought. “No wand, too close to dodge and everyone else is down.”

Her eyes drifted to Ron laying on the floor at her feet. His head moved a little and his unfocused eyes stared up at her.

“Last chance,” she thought.

“I love you Ron Weasley, you great prat,” she said quietly and smiled at him.

“Very touching,” said the witch raising her wand. “Goodbye mudblood,”

A cry of “DISPLACIO!” came from below and was followed by many screams and crashes.

Both Hermione and the witch turned their heads to look over at the balcony. A loud noise then came from below and seemed to be getting closer.

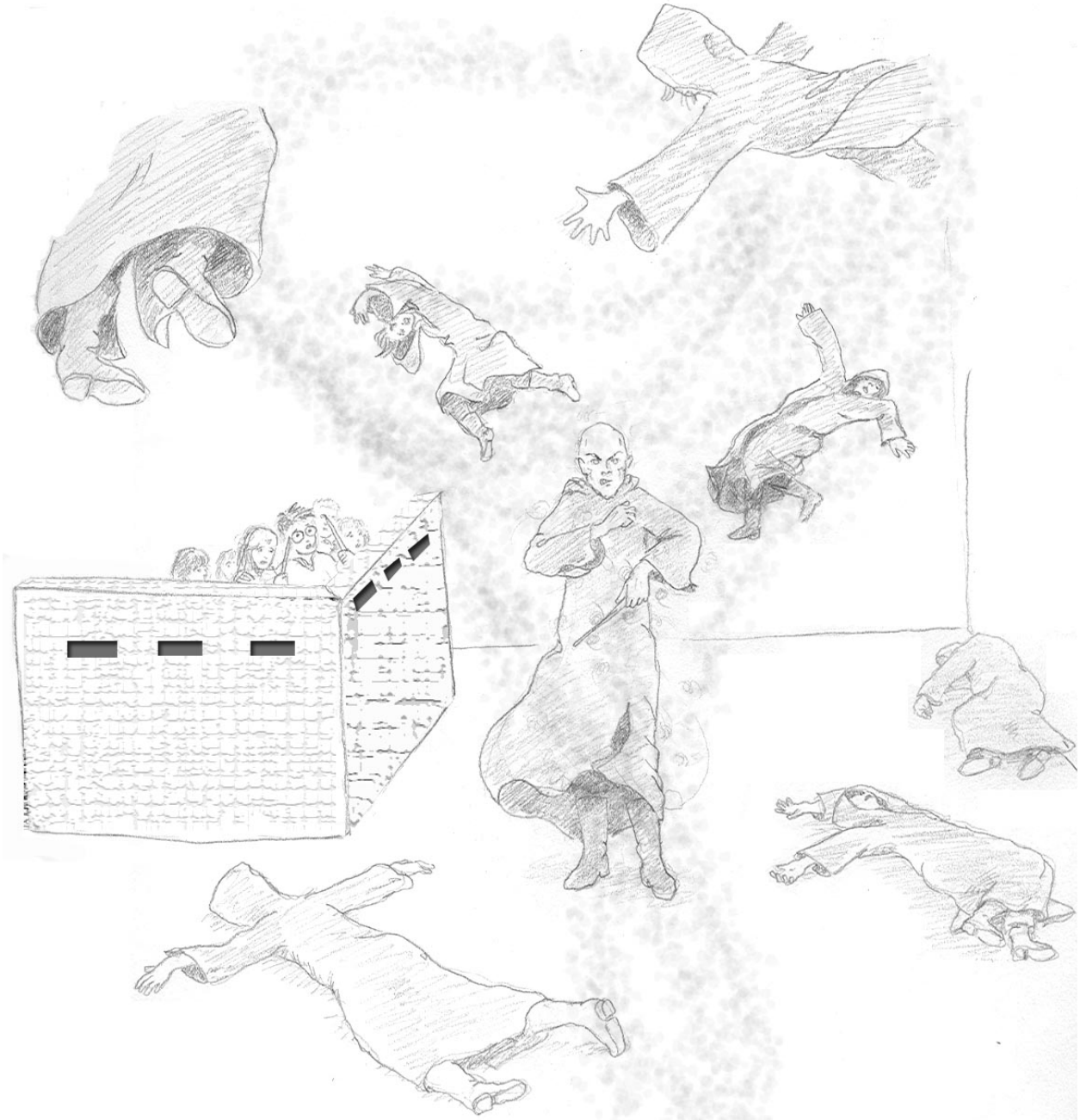
“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAahhhhhhhhhhhh!” screamed Harry as he flew up from below like he had been shot out of a cannon. He cleared the railing easily and landed catlike on his feet facing Hermione and the witch.

“Harry Potter!” exclaimed the witch, as she stared dumbfounded at him.

Harry apparently decided to skip the greetings and go directly to the jinxes because his only response was “Stupefy!” His red stunner streaked across the room and flattened

the witch.

Chapter Thirty-One – Pyrrhic Victory



Harry and Hermione roused everyone and bound the Death Eaters. The disillusionment spells had worn off, or they would have had quite a time finding Luna. She was in the far corner of the room, still unconscious from whatever curse the witch

had hit her with. Once they revived her, Luna was weak and needed assistance in walking, leaning on Ginny's shoulder.

“Hermione, what did you say to me when I was just coming around?” asked Ron.

Hermione went a bit pink and replied, “Nothing.”

“You said something. I heard my name, at least.”

“If you must know, I called you a great prat. But right now we have more important things to worry, about don't you think?” said Hermione. Her voice was higher than normal. She hurried ahead to walk next to Padma.

Harry went as fast Luna and Ginny could manage. They made it safely up to the next floor; there was only one hall left to traverse when Ginny asked Luna, “How far did you manage to scout ahead?”

“I reached the door to the storeroom, but I didn't take much time looking it over,” answered Luna.

“Why would you need to look over a door?” asked Harry.

“Oh, I think you'll see for yourself.”

Harry didn't much like the sound of that.

They made it down the last hall, turned right, and came to the door.

“I understand what you mean, Luna,” said Harry, staring at the door in shock. The door was covered in glyphs of all different sizes, shapes and colors. However, it didn't hum like the other glyph door Harry had seen.

“Can you read much of it, Luna?” asked Padma.

“Not the glyphs, no. I can tell this one does more than just stay shut; it will hit back if attacked. But the key, it's really simplistic,” said Luna, sounding slightly confused as she looked over the door.

“That's your idea of simplistic?” asked Ron, inspecting the incomprehensible collection of symbols drawn on the door.

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“Just the key: it's in the most basic alphabet, and it's also written very straightforwardly. Certainly not the style I'd expect from Mars; more like a student created it than a master,” answered Luna.

“What's the key, Luna?” asked Hermione.

“It looks like a riddle.” She read it aloud:

Give thanks for respite, give thanks for renewal;

Thank her for the gift, greater than a jewel.

From her gift we are replenished;

Without her gift, we are diminished.

Give thanks not to suffer a fate so cruel.

“Thanks for renewal and respite? Sounds like he wants us to be grateful for the summer holidays,” said Ron.

“Don't be thick,” said Hermione.

“I'm not. It fits the riddle, Hermione. Respite, renewal, replenished. You get them all during holidays. And it'd be a cruel fate to have school year round!” retorted Ron.

“I can't see Mars being so dramatic about missing out on leisure time, Ron,” said Ginny.

“I agree, Ginny,” said Hermione. “But Ron does have a point about the holidays providing replenishment, respite and renewal. What else gives you those things?”

“Relaxing?”

“No—remember, Mars considers being without it suffering a cruel fate,” said Padma.

“What would he have considered an awful fate?” asked Harry.

“Being banished?” suggested Ginny.

“That doesn't fit the first part,” Harry shook his head.

Hermione's head snapped up with a flash of realization. “Not being able to sleep *was* his cruel fate,” she said.

“And it fits,” said Ron.

“I think I understand the entire riddle now,” Hermione said as she walked up to the menacing door. “We give thanks for the gift of Evaki. We give thanks for sleep.”

The door slowly opened inwards.

Ron, Ginny, and Padma congratulated Hermione enthusiastically, but Harry cut them off. He wanted to be on the other side of that door and behind its protection. He rushed them through the door and slammed it shut behind Ginny and Luna.

“I thought you said this was an old storeroom, Harry,” said Ron, looking around the place.

Harry understood Ron's confusion. The shelves he remembered were now gone. In fact, except for an odd V-shaped barrier in the back left corner, the room was completely bare. The room was large and rectangular, with a high ceiling and only one large window for light, over fifteen feet off the floor.

Harry walked over to the spot on the wall where the entrance to the secret passage should have been, but found nothing.

“This is very odd,” said Harry. “Why are the shelves missing, and who would seal this secret door?”

“Not to mention, why would Mars put so many powerful glyphs on the door to an out-of-the-way storeroom? It simply makes no sense,” said Hermione. “Why would he want to keep everyone out of here?”

“Not everyone,” said Luna. “That key was purposely easy to read. Anyone with even a little knowledge of glyphs could read it.”

“Yes, but other than you, what other students know anything about glyphs?” asked

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Padma.

“None, really.”

“And only a few of us heard Steele describe the gift of Evaki. Mars must have known that we were going to make it to that door!” said Harry.

“Oh come on. You're saying he knew both Luna and Hermione would need to enter this room?” asked Ron.

“Yes! I think he saw all of this happening, in fact. All the spells he taught us this year, we used them today! Remember what he said about Hermione and dementors?” asked Harry.

Realization lit Ron's face now. “That the next time she faced one, he wouldn't be there for her,” he answered. Harry nodded.

“Do you think he knew he was going to die in the forest then?” asked Hermione sadly.

“DIE?” squealed Padma.

“Yeah, I think so. Something he said earlier bothered me, but I didn't know why until now. Remember that bit about Dumbledore returning today? He said Dumbledore would be returning this very day and that *you* would celebrate together. He left himself out...he knew.” Harry's voice broke.

“Why are you talking like Mars is dead?” demanded Padma, her eyes tearing up. Hermione explained what they had heard; Padma was crushed.

Harry spoke to Ron in a low voice so only he could hear. “This is it. This room is where we fight.”

“What? Us versus all the Death Eaters?”

“No, me and Voldemort.” Harry walked over to the barrier. The others followed him, except for the sobbing Padma.

“Look at this barrier,” said Harry. “It's covered in glyphs; I bet they repel curses or

something. It's also got holes to cast spells through. Mars put this here for us to use.”

“Use for what?” asked Ginny.

“As a shield against the Death Eaters,” he answered.

“That won't shield us for long, Harry,” said Hermione anxiously.

“Long enough for me to challenge Voldemort to a duel,” Harry said darkly.

“What? Harry, that's insane!” said Hermione.

“No, it's the only way. I've been trained all year to kill him, Hermione.”

“Harry,” Hermione said desperately. “You're not making any sense. That battle must have jarred your mind, or something. Mars was going to kill him, Harry, not you. You were trained to defend yourself – ,”

“NO!” said Harry loudly. “I have to do it. No one else can.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” demanded Hermione. She looked at Harry as if he were a raving lunatic.

“It's the prophecy, Hermione,” Ron put in earnestly. “It said only Harry can vanquish the Dark Lord and that neither Harry nor Voldemort can live while the other survives. It has to be Harry.”

Hermione glared at Ron. “You're both mad. That prophecy was smashed, no one knows what it said!” She looked frantic.

“Dumbledore witnessed its original telling,” Harry told her. “He's always known what it said. He showed me his memory of it with his pensieve last year. I-I didn't tell anyone. It was Mars that told Ron about the prophecy, right when we started our training.”

Hermione fell silent. The color left her face; Harry wondered if she was about to faint. He felt Ginny put her arm around his waist.

“We're with you all the way, Harry. You're not alone in this.” Ginny looked up at him seriously.

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Just then, they heard footsteps running in the hallway outside the door. “I found'em! I found'em!” came a husky voice. “Send word to the Dark Lord!”

“Back behind the barrier, everyone, quickly!” Harry ordered.

They all hurried behind the wall, except for Luna, who still looked vague from her earlier curse. Ginny quickly ran out and fetched her.

“C'mon, let's get him then!” said the voice in the hall.

“No, we wait for the others,” answered another voice.

“What? And let Reynolds take all the credit and rewards? Nothin' doin'. I say we get them first!”

“All right, after you then.”

Harry heard the doorknob rattle...

ZZZZZZZZZZZZt

The wizard screamed in pain – it sounded like he was being electrocuted. A moment later, the buzzing ceased.

“Baba Yaga's boiled covered bum!” swore the other wizard. “He's snuffed it.”

Harry looked around at everyone huddled behind the glyph-covered barrier.

“When they get here, keep behind the wall. Don't interfere with my duel: if you do, so will they. Once the duel is over, regardless who's still alive—Voldemort or me—”

Hermione whimpered; Harry continued: “start jinxing immediately. It's our only chance.”

They all nodded at him.

For the next few minutes the room was silent as they all strained to hear the Death Eaters in the hall. After about a quarter of an hour, they heard what they had been waiting for and dreading.

“The master, he comes. Out of the way!”

Harry then heard a voice, *his* voice, the voice of his parents' murderer. It was high pitched and deathly cold.

“Quite a collection of glyphs. That fool Mars should have spent more time learning to duel and less on this silliness. He might have lived long enough to see his beloved Harry Potter die.”

The Death Eaters laughed.

Voldemort then said some odd incantation and the door glowed yellow. A high-pitched whine grew steadily louder. After five minutes the whining was piercing (Harry and the others had their fingers in their ears) and the door glowed brilliant yellow, but it was still intact. After ten minutes Harry had just started to believe that the door might hold when it suddenly exploded, sending splinters flying across the room. Their eyes were riveted on the doorway as Geoff Reynolds walked through it.

“Giddyday, Potter! I'm afraid it's the end of the line for you, mate,” he said, twitching his head about. He looked as insane as ever. Harry and the others kept their wands fixed on him, but said nothing.

Witches and wizards poured into the room, some wearing masks, and some not. Over two dozen had entered when Voldemort himself walked through the doorway. For a second Harry had a clear shot at him, but he missed his chance when Voldemort moved behind several of his followers.

Hermione let out a small whimper, and Harry could feel Ron trembling behind him – they had never been in Voldemort's presence before. Stay focused, he told himself.

“Hiding behind a wall, Potter?” The high voice said nastily. “How do you think that will help? I suppose with Dumbledore dead, it's the closest thing to hiding behind him you can manage.”

Before Harry could challenge Voldemort, Reynolds' voice rang out.

“Stupefy!”

A large red stunner streaked across the room and slammed into Lucius Malfoy. He bounced off the wall and slammed onto the floor.

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Everyone whirled to face the Australian. He was standing away from the others, near the entrance to the room.

“Reynolds, explain,” hissed Voldemort furiously.

“He's a traitor, in't he?” answered Reynolds, his head twitching even faster than before.

“What?”

“And so's young Montague here!” snapped Reynolds, flicking his wand again. “Stupefy!” Another large stunner streaked across the room and knocked a masked wizard to the floor.

Voldemort and the other Death Eaters pointed their wands at Reynolds. “Reynolds, you have gained my favor recently, but it is quickly receding,” Voldemort said icily. “You have five seconds to explain what you are doing before I kill you.”

Harry noticed that two things had changed in the room. A V-shaped barrier, like the one Harry and his friends now hid behind, but smaller, had appeared near the doorway—or near where the doorway had been just a few seconds ago, because the second odd thing he saw was that the exit was now gone. The wall where it had been was completely smooth, as if the door had never existed.

Reynolds quickly turned, took two steps, and leaped over the new barrier. From behind the wall he shouted, “Honest m'lord, I'm just looking out for ya. If people see you hangin' round this lot all the time, they'll start to talk.”

“He's flipped!” said one of the witches loudly.

“What happened to the door?” demanded Voldemort, looking around wildly. “And the window, the ceiling—this whole room has changed!”

Reynolds cackled loudly. Voldemort slowly spun around, looking up as he turned.

“He's right,” said Ginny. The ceiling now towered more than sixty feet above them; the large window had become merely a slit near the top of the wall.

“What kind of trap have you led me into, Reynolds?” screamed Voldemort.

“A trap? That's slander, that is! It was Malfoy that gave ya the okay sign to enter Hogwarts, ya son of a muggle,” laughed Reynolds.

Voldemort's snake-like face contorted with anger. His fists balled up as he took a very deliberate deep breath. He exhaled slowly and hissed, “Death for them all. Right here, right now.”

Voldemort and all of his followers raised their wands. Half pointed them at Reynolds; the other half pointed at Harry's barricade. Harry and his friends aimed their own wands through the firing holes in the wall.

“So much for my duel,” thought Harry darkly as he tried to get Voldemort lined up.

Like two Napoleonic-age armies before the first order to fire, there was stillness for several seconds as the two groups stared at each other in tense anticipation. Then, instead of the incantation of a curse or counter spell Harry expected, he suddenly heard music. The tune he did not recognize, but its source was unmistakable.

“Lily!” Ginny exclaimed next to him.

Lilandria flew in through the high, tiny window and circled the room. Her song was a war chant with a deep three-beat rhythm. As always, her song boosted Harry's morale; the fear and apprehension inside him wilted away. Voldemort and his Death Eaters, on the other hand, looked unnerved.

Voldemort looked up at Lily in confusion and annoyance. “Rockwood, kill that thing,” he said in his cold high voice as he pointed up to the ceiling. “Then we finish the rest.”

Boom, Boom, Boom, continued the rhythm.

One of the masked wizards stepped away from the group and raised his wand.

“Stupefy!” Reynolds cried again.

The stunned Rockwood fell to the floor.

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Boom, Boom, Boom.

Voldemort and most of the Death Eaters immediately fired off a volley of curses at the unstable Australian. The hexes exploded when they hit the barrier, but did no visible damage. Reynolds, who had ducked to safety, cackled maniacally from behind the wall.

Boom, Boom, Boom!

“Do you know what that bird is? Do you know what she signifies, Lord Voldemort?” shouted Reynolds from the floor with insane glee.

The Death Eaters gasped. “How dare you speak his name!” screeched a witch.

Boom, Boom, Boom!

“It is a herald,” said Reynolds. His voice now sounded sane and steady. “A herald of twin purposes: it is a harbinger of your imminent and long overdue death, and a forerunner of *his* arrival.”

Many of the Death Eaters looked uncomfortable, but Voldemort was outraged. “Let him come. I do not fear Dumbledore!” shouted Voldemort. The Dark Lord then whipped his wand up at Lily and cried, “AVADA KEDAVRA!” An evil green light flashed up at Lilandria, followed by an explosion. Ginny, Hermione and Padma all screamed.

An instant later, Harry spotted Lily flying on the opposite side of the room, and the war chant continued.

Boom, Boom, Boom!

Voldemort stared up at the bird, shaking with fury.

“It's been nice knowing you, Tom Riddle,” said Reynolds sarcastically.

Harry then heard the loud **crack** of someone apparating. He looked for the source of the sound and saw a tall figure standing at the opposite end of the room. Mars' robes were missing, and his leather jacket was a bit worse for wear: it had several tears, and about half of its talismans and charms were blackened. There was blood on his neck

and left shoulder, but Mars looked much better than the last time Harry had seen him this close. Mars was standing straight and tall; his eyes crackled with sparks and his wand was steady as he pointed it at the crowd of Death Eaters.

“DISPLACIO!” he barked.

Innumerable red spheres shot out of his wand and blanketed the room. Screams filled the air as the Death Eaters were ripped off the floor and thrown into a red vortex of globes. The vortex lifted them high into the air and spun them about with tremendous speed, forcing them into bone-crushing collisions with the walls. After three or four such hits, each Death Eater was forever silenced.

The great mass of the spell, however, was concentrated on Voldemort. Thousands of the orbs surrounded him, but the Dark Lord was not swept into the air. Voldemort's wand rose, slowly, against the force of the red spheres.

Boom, Boom, Boom!

Harry heard something hit the floor behind him; two hands fell on his shoulders. He started to turn, but the grip stopped him. “Don't worry Harry, it's me,” said Geoff Reynolds.

“Don't move a muscle, Death Eater!” hissed Ron. Ginny and Padma, on either side of Harry, both had their wands pointing over his shoulders.

“Ronald Weasley, you git,” snapped Reynolds, “don't you recognize your own brother?”

“Wha?” Ron stammered in confusion. Then he grew angry. “Look, mate, your insane act might work with the Death Eaters, but it doesn't with me. GET AWAY FROM HARRY—NOW!”

Reynolds sighed. “Harry, look at this. It'll prove who I am.” He shoved a roll of parchment into Harry's hands. Harry immediately recognized the parchment as the Marauder's Map.

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Boom, Boom, Boom!

“Where did you get this?” Harry demanded.

“Took it from Neville Longbottom.”

“After you killed him!” said Padma furiously.

“He's not dead, you stupid girl! I only made it look that way so the Death Eaters wouldn't really kill him. Now look at the map, Harry!” said Reynolds bossily.

Harry stared at the room on the map, and saw that in the middle of his group was none other than Percy Weasley.

“Percy?” he said.

“It's really you, Perce?” asked Ron.

“Yes, you heard him. Now get those wands out of my face,” snapped Percy.

Padma and Ginny lowered their wands.

Harry stared harder at the map. None of the swirling airborne witches or wizards were showing, so Harry figured they must be dead. He could see the names of the three wizards Percy had stunned, but it was the names of the remaining wizards that interested him. Voldemort showed up as Tom Riddle, which didn't surprise Harry, but made him smile despite their situation. The other wizard, however, was not listed as Mars or Angel, but as Mordecai Saunders.

“Yes Ginny, I've been taking that potion for months while I posed as Reynolds. Please, no more questions,” said Percy crossly. “We're missing the greatest wizards' duel in nearly sixty years!”

“But shouldn't we help him? That's Voldemort he's fighting!” Hermione said, trembling.

Percy looked at her as though she was as insane as he had acted earlier. “Mars need help? I thought you were supposed to be the smart one of your year. We stay behind this barrier until he tells us otherwise. That was his order,” said Percy, and he turned back

to watch the duel.

Boom, Boom, Boom!

Hermione looked furious but said nothing.

Harry looked back at the duelers. Voldemort had almost managed to raise his wand high enough to point it at Mars. Sweat poured off Voldemort, and he screamed angrily as he strained to raise the tip of his wand a few more crucial inches. A second later, an explosion ripped through the room. Energy crackled around Harry; his neck hairs stood on end, and every inch of his skin tingled.

The multitude of red globes disappeared, and horrible thuds sounded across the room as the mangled bodies of the Death Eaters fell to the floor like some morbid necromantic rain. Harry shivered.

Boom, Boom, Boom!

Both wizards stood, catlike, facing each other. Voldemort's wand and Mars' fiery sword bobbed slightly as they balanced on the balls of their feet.

"I know who you are, boy. I shall kill you now as I did your mother, in front of your very eyes, many years ago," hissed Voldemort.

"You ran that day, Riddle; you fled because you were losing. Today ends your running from death," replied Mars. He glowed and crackled as energy pulses swam around him.

Voldemort scowled. He spun his wand in a tight circle and cried, "Avada Kedavra!" An evil green light shot out at Mars. Mars swung his sword up and spat an incantation. Something flashed in front of the sword; the green light crashed into it and exploded harmlessly. Mars stared threateningly at the Dark Lord.

Hermione said, shocked, "The killing curse—it—"

"Cannot be blocked!" said a stunned Voldemort.

Mars grew brighter, and a wind whipped throughout the room.

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“Avada Kedavra is unblockable...” roared Mars, stepping toward Voldemort.

Boom, Boom, Boom!

“You cannot apparate inside of Hogwarts ... ”

Mars took another step closer.

Boom, Boom, Boom!

“Looooorrrrd Voldemort...is the greatest sorcerer in the world!”

Another step.

Boom, Boom, Boom!

“You should be proud, Tom Riddle. Proud to be dying the same day as these myths!”

Voldemort screamed and swept his wand in front of him. A dozen large snakes appeared on the floor between them and immediately slithered at Mars.

Mars leaped at the closest snake, easily avoiding its strike. He did not cleave the beast with his sword, as Harry expected, but waved his sword over it instead. The snake transfigured into a songbird which flew into the air and joined Lily in flight and in song.

Boom, Boom, Boom!

Mars continued his dance around the snakes, transfiguring as many as three at a time. Each new bird added volume to the song and made the radiant energy surrounding him glow brighter. His moves were so graceful and so in time with the chant that the whole event might have been choreographed.

“Kill him, Mars!” Percy chanted in time with the beat.

Mars seemed to be a blur of speed and light as he finished off the last of the snakes. Voldemort had tried to curse him several times but Mars had blocked each hex effortlessly, as if it was simply part of the red wizard's dance.

Harry and the others joined in Percy's chant; Mars glowed even brighter and looked somehow taller. The energy pulses around him now flashed and danced with the beat of

the war chant.

“Kill him, Mars!”

Harry felt as if he were a part of a gigantic effort to kill Voldemort. Each chant he shouted pulled him more deeply into the fight. It felt like the air, the stones, the walls, and even the very magical foundations of Hogwarts itself were all helping Mars. The entire room was in complete harmony and focused upon accomplishing one thing:

“Kill Him, Mars!” chanted Percy, the children, the air, the walls, and the Castle.

Harry could never have imagined Voldemort, the Dark Lord himself, looking so puny as he did now facing the rage of Mars.

Mars was within ten feet of Voldemort when his sword slashed at Riddle. A purple flame shot from its point towards his enemy. Voldemort hastily summoned a silver shield to block it. The flame shattered the shield and struck Voldemort's leg. The Dark Lord fell to the floor.

“That was dark magic!” cried Hermione. “Why did he use that?” The others ignored her.

“Kill Him Mars!”

Voldemort tapped his leg with his wand and sprang up, but Mars was upon him. With dizzying speed, Mars' left hand seized Voldemort's right and lifted it to point Voldemort's wand harmlessly upward. Mars' right hand, now free of wand or sword, flew to his enemy's throat and began to squeeze.

There was a snap so loud that Harry heard it over the music and chanting. Voldemort's wand fell to the floor. The Dark Lord's right hand, now wandless, looked boneless as well, as it hung limply at an unnatural angle off his forearm.

Mars slowly raised Voldemort off the ground by his throat and drew his enemy face to face. Tom Riddle seemed to wilt as he was brought within the glow of the red wizard. Mars' terrifying eyes blazed at Voldemort, and Harry himself could see the fear in

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the Dark Lord: fear that he had never known before. Harry could see the doom that the evil sorcerer felt was so near. But a flicker of hope sprung into Voldemort's eyes, and Harry's contact was broken.

Voldemort's left arm swung behind him; his wand leaped from the floor into his hand. Voldemort swung his wand at Mars, but the red wizard disappeared. Voldemort dropped to the floor; hastily, he scanned the room for Mars.

“Kill Him Mars!”

Mars was standing behind Voldemort. He flicked his wand; an enormous yellow beam flew from it, ripping Voldemort off the floor and throwing him across the room into the far wall. Bones shattered and blood spattered. Voldemort slumped to the floor, bending in places where no joints existed.

“He's got to be dead,” said Hermione, who had not been chanting for a while.

Voldemort, however, was still alive and moving. From the floor, he said some evil-sounding words, and an ill-looking green gas rose from his body. The stench quickly spread throughout the room. Voldemort rose from the floor stiffly and unnaturally. His muscles were obeying him, but not very well. His myriad open cuts were no longer bleeding, and his skin was a nauseating green-gray color.

Fire flew from Voldemort's wand and hit the floor between him and Mars. From the flames on the floor shot up three fiery dragon heads, each atop a twelve-foot neck of flame. The heads roared loudly; from the mouth of each, a ball of fire flew at Mars.

“Repello!” cried Mars; the fireballs turned and sped at Voldemort.

Voldemort exploded the fireballs harmlessly in the air, while Mars cast a hex on the fiery dragon heads. A second later, one of the heads hiccuped, and a songbird came from its mouth and flew up to join the circling, singing flock. The second head hiccuped, and a red soap bubble floated out of its mouth; from the third came two perfectly-shaped smoke rings. Harry could have sworn the fiery heads actually looked confused.

“Kill Him Mars!”

“Avada Kedavra!” cried Voldemort, and a green light shot at Mars again.

Mars easily leaped out of the way and fired a spell back. His spell hit the wall behind Voldemort. From the wall, a giant stone hand appeared, reaching out and seizing Voldemort. Mars disappeared.

Voldemort's wand hand was still free; he tapped the stone fist with it. The hand disintegrated, dropping him back to the floor. Mars appeared again behind Voldemort, but the Dark Lord whirled to face him. Mars stepped forward, swinging his sword, but Voldemort made a slashing motion with his wand and a purple flame shot out, catching Mars in the chest.

Harry and his friends flinched; their chant missed a beat. It seemed that their worry was unfounded, however, because Mars was unhurt, and had not even paused. He completed his swing, and his sword lopped off Voldemort's left arm at the elbow. The arm and the wand landed several feet away; Voldemort fell to the floor once again.

“Kill Him Mars!”

While no blood flowed from the wound, Voldemort was clearly in great pain. He struggled on the floor, trying desperately to stand. Mars stepped forward and kicked him viciously in the face. Voldemort's upper body flew off the floor and slammed backwards into the wall. Voldemort groaned.

“Go on, boy,” Voldemort grunted with an effort. “Kill me, you'll be famous. Your—your family in England might even acknowledge you.”

“Still got some fight left in you, eh?” said Mars, turning. “Accio wand!” he cried, and Voldemort's wand flew into Mars' hand.

“I'll give you a chance, a better one than you ever gave your victims,” said Mars, and he threw the wand back down to Voldemort. Mars then walked about a dozen feet away, and raised his sword over his head.

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“What's he doing? Why did he give the wand back?” Hermione cried. “Mars, stop playing with him! He's too dangerous,” she shouted.

Mars was now spinning rapidly; after a few seconds, Harry's chant faltered again, because he swore he was seeing Mars in two places at once. Then Harry saw three, four, five and then six of Mars, all spinning and shimmering. Soon they stopped spinning, but each still shimmered, almost impossible to focus on.

“Oh my,” said Padma. “I wonder which one is really him.” Harry nodded, dazed.

Voldemort had managed to stand up; precariously, he held his wand with his broken hand.

“Make this curse a good one, Tommy; it'll be your last,” said the six forms of Mars.

“Avada Kedavra!” said Voldemort weakly.

The green light flashed again and passed harmlessly through one of the middle illusions.

“Stupefy!” cried the six copies of Mars, and six enormous stunners streaked at Voldemort.

The Dark Lord managed to get a shield up, but the three stunners that it blocked all passed through it and himself, while the massive stunner from his right hit him and the wall. Voldemort was thrown powerfully backwards into the wall and bounced off onto the floor, where he lay motionless. Mars' stunner had also ripped holes in the wall and floor.

“Three down, and only Pettigrew to go. You'll soon be avenged, dear Sirius,” said Mars darkly, as his doubles faded away.

Hermione started to stand up, but Percy barked at her, “No, he'll call us!”

“Lilly,” said Mars, looking up. “Your work is done here. Please go to Bill.”

Lilandria and her flock flew out the tiny window; silence descended upon the room. Mars placed two of his fingers on one of his jacket's talismans. “Sally, are you well?” he said, smiling for the first time. A pause, then, “What do you mean, did we win?” he asked in

mock outrage.

Harry smiled at Ginny. She smiled back, and simultaneously they moved together for a kiss. A real kiss, a real good one.

“Why didn't I ever do this before?” thought Harry.

Percy patted him on the back. “Time for that later, kids.”

Mars was silent for a moment, then spoke again. “He's at my feet. In a few minutes I'll turn control of the school over to Percy and meet you there. Congratulations on getting Dolohov; tell the Defenders ten thousand galleons to whomever bags Spikes. Goodbye, darlin'.”

The faraway look returned to the red wizard's face. “Percy, get to the Hufflepuff entrance quickly. Snape and some other Order members are about to be ambushed as they're setting their own ambush. Afterward, y'all shouldn't have any troubles cleaning up the stragglers,” Mars commanded. He flicked his wand at the wall, and the doorway reappeared.

Percy leaped out from behind the barrier. “You were brilliant, Mars. Just brilliant! The greatest wizard in history! Riddle was nothing compared to your lore,” he brown-nosed.

“Your performance was unbelievable, Percy, but we've no time for celebrations. Off you go!”

Percy bowed and fled through the door.

“But Mars! Snape is a traitor. He's the one that caught us and then gave us to the Death Eaters,” yelled Harry.

“No, Harry, you don't know the whole story,” said Mars. “Professors Snape and McGonagall were both working to subvert the Death Eaters from the inside. The explanation is complicated, and will have to wait; your date with destiny is at hand.” Mars looked down at the three stunned Death Eaters. “Those three may recover soon:

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Ron, cover Montague; Hermione, get Malfoy; Ginny, get that other one, and Padma, you watch the door. If they move at all, stun them, but don't kill them, not even Malfoy. We need them for questioning – Percy thinks either Malfoy or Montague knows where Pettigrew is. Harry and Luna, come to me.”

Mars' students quickly obeyed his commands.

“Hermione, I wasn't playing with Riddle,” Mars explained. “I wanted him to waste his last bit of energy on some spells before I dared to let Harry near him.

“Harry, prepare yourself. I can't help you now, you have to do it on your own. We cannot risk defying the prophecy.

“Luna, come over here by the wall, right behind me, darlin'.” Mars looked at the still-wobbly Luna with concern, then turned back to Harry. “There's no rush, Harry. This should be the last time you ever cast the Killing Curse, so take your time and get it right.”

Harry nodded, closed his eyes, and thought of all the evil that Voldemort had wrought.

“The Killing Curse?” said Hermione. “Harry's supposed to cast the darkest of Dark Magic spells?”

“Shut up, Hermione,” thought Harry, trying to refocus his thoughts.

“Quiet!” commanded Mars.

“My parents, Cedric Diggory, Mars' mum ...,” thought Harry.

“Mars,” said Hermione tearfully. “He could only know this Dark Magic because you taught him! How could you?”

“SHUT UP, Hermione!” yelled Harry.

“Watch your man, Hermione!” barked Mars.

Harry heard Hermione step backward. He thought again about the Hell his and so many other's lives had been because of Voldemort. He remembered the agony of his godfather Sirius; he thought of living with the Dursleys instead of with his loving parents.

He relived his Mother's screams for mercy on his part. His rage grew. The Herberts, a loving family according to Hermione and Ginny. All these murders were so horrible, but he could now end Voldemort's reign forever.

“HARRY PLEASE!” wailed Hermione. “If you do this you'll be just like ... ARGGGH—”

Harry spun around, ready to scream at Hermione. However, she was not shaking her finger at him as he had imagined, but lying on the floor and clutching her face trying to stem the bleeding.

Lucius Malfoy was now standing in front of her, holding her wand and aiming it right at Harry.

“Avada Kedavra!” shouted Malfoy, and a green light, and the sound of rushing death, flew at Harry.

Harry was caught flatfooted, his wand pointed worthlessly at the floor. For the fourth time in two years he simply accepted that he was going to die. Just as the light was about to strike him, a red blur moved in front of him, and the spell struck Mars full in the chest. The Angel of Justice crumpled to the floor at Harry's feet.

Chapter Thirty-Two – Upon the Death of Great Wizards



Instinct alone caused Harry to raise his wand.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!” he cried.

Harry's death curse flew at Lucius Malfoy; simultaneously another green flash slammed into his target from Ron's wand. Malfoy, like Mars, fell lifeless to the floor.

Harry and Ron grimaced at each other; Ron fell to his knees in tears. Harry gazed

dully at Mars' prone figure.

“This is another dream,” he thought. “Soon Mars will wake me and we'll be training again. Please, Mars, wake me up. Now! Please.”

“Mars!” Padma shrieked as she threw herself on his body. She put her ear to his chest, listening for a heartbeat. “No, no,” she whispered, and fell sobbing on Mars' shoulder.

Harry couldn't force himself to do more than look around the room. Ginny came up to Harry, looking lost as she mumbled, “He can't be, he can't.”

Ron, still on his knees, stared blankly ahead in disbelief; Hermione was crying on the floor where she had fallen. Luna leaned against the wall, both hands on her forehead, breathing hard.

“HE'S GETTING AWAY!!!” screamed Ginny. She flicked her wand. A red stunner shot past Harry and struck the floor a few feet to his right. He turned and saw an enormous snake's tail slipping down the hole in the floor to the room below.

Ginny shook with fury.

“He's gotten away!” she shrieked. “He got away after he was beaten, and Mars is *dead!* ... Why? Because of *her!*” Ginny jabbed her wand at Hermione, knocking her up into the air. Hermione crashed to the floor, where she moved feebly, moaning in pain.

Ginny stormed over to Hermione and grabbed her by the hair, lifting her to her knees.

“You killed him! You interrupted Harry and got Mars killed! Are you happy? Happy that Harry didn't use Dark Magic to rid the world of Voldemort?”

Hermione's bloodied lips moved. “I'm-I'm devastated.”

Ginny shrieked again and threw Hermione onto her back. She pointed her wand straight at Hermione's heart; her whole body convulsed with rage.

“Aaaiiie!” screamed Padma.

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All eyes turned to Padma, who was crawling backwards away from Mars' body in panic. She bumped into Luna, who blinked out of her trance long enough to help Padma to her feet.

Something moved inside Mars' jacket, and a second later an enormous ruby floated up and away from his body and exploded into a cloud of glittering red dust. When the dust dissipated, Dumbledore was standing in front of Ginny and Hermione, with his back to Harry. He stood rigidly, and gripped his wand tightly. Even from his back, Harry could tell Dumbledore was furious.

“You've escaped from the Death Eaters' trap?” asked Ron, his first words since the fall of Mars.

“Death Eaters?” said Dumbledore with distaste. “No Death Eater, nor even Voldemort himself, could have held me that long. Mars was responsible! Where is he?”

“He's dead!” sobbed Padma, sinking to the floor again in despair.

Dumbledore turned toward Padma, but stopped when he saw Mars' body and took a step back in shock.

“Oh Mordecai,” he said softly. “How can this be? Voldemort could have never defeated you. Especially not here, not at Hogwarts.” Tears ran down the Headmaster's face.

“Voldemort DIDN'T beat him!” snarled Ginny.

“What happened?” demanded Dumbledore, turning back to her.

“She happened!” shouted Harry, pointing accusingly at Hermione.

“Explain.”

Ginny recounted the duel between Mars and Voldemort. During her account, Luna walked shakily over to Mars' body, bent down and embraced him. Afterward, she returned to the wall and leaned against it for support.

“... she steps over Malfoy and screams at Harry, ruining his concentration again,

but this time Malfoy jumps up, grabs her wand and punches her. He points her wand at Harry and casts the Killing Curse, but Mars steps in front of him,” said Ginny, sobbing loudly. “Mars falls, and while we're all in shock V-Voldemort escapes!”

“But Mars was using Dark Magic. And he taught it to Harry!” said Hermione, rising unsteadily to her feet.

“Shut up!” shouted Ginny. “What do you know about fighting dark wizards?”

“Teaching those spells was evil,” whispered Hermione.

Harry growled.

“You are so arrogant!” snarled Ginny, stepping toward Hermione. “Evil, was he? Do you know what his greatest fear was, Miss Dark Wizard killer?”

“What are you talking about?”

“He saw a boggart two months ago. His fear was you dying! Not Harry, not me, not Steele, but you!”

“But, but—why?”

“He shouted at the boggart, like it was a vision. He said that he would pay any price to prevent you from dying, Hermione. And now, thanks to you, he's paid the ultimate price!” Ginny stepped forward and struck Hermione's face.

Hermione stumbled backwards, barely keeping her feet. Ginny followed after her, then suddenly jumped back as if poked by a cattle prod.

“You are making this tragedy worse, Miss Weasley!” said Dumbledore forcefully.

“SHE MADE THIS TRAGEDY!” shrieked Ginny.

Hermione's expression showed total despondence. She looked down at Mars's body, then at Harry, who was scowling at her, and then finally into Ginny's murderous stare. Hermione then grabbed her own hair and started to scream. It was a pitiful scream of complete hopelessness and hysteria. She began to yank at her hair as though to rip it out by the roots.

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“Hermione, stop it!” yelled Ron.

Hermione turned and sprinted for the doorway, where she collided suddenly with Snape, who had just entered the room. He instinctively caught her by the shoulders and looked down at her face.

“YOU!” she screamed and snatched herself out of his grip. She ran silently out of the doorway and down the hall. Snape stared at her in confusion.

“Why is she running like – oh my,” said Lupin, stepping over the threshold and spying Mars' body.

Dumbledore looked down at Mars, and then his head snapped up.

“The visions! Harry, quickly. Do you have that map of your father's with you?”

“Yes,” said Harry and he held it out.

“Remus,” said Dumbledore. “Take that map you made and find Miss Granger immediately. She mustn't be left alone, even for a second! Take no excuses from her to get away. This is a matter of life and death.”

Lupin quickly took the map from Harry, glanced at it, and ran out of the room.

Snape looked down at Mars' lifeless body. He turned to Harry and spat, “I told you not to put your faith in that fool, Potter.”

Harry and Ginny growled and raised their wands at Snape.

“Severus,” boomed Dumbledore angrily, “If you value your life, you will leave now and never mention Mars in front of me again!”

Everyone in the room—with the exception of Luna, who still stood blankly against the wall—stared at the Headmaster in shock. He was angrier than Harry had ever seen him, and was every bit as frightening as Mars in a rage. Snape actually shivered in fear before he turned and hastily left the room.

“Professor,” said Ron cautiously. “Did you say Mars trapped you?”

“Yes,” answered Dumbledore. “He did it the night he told me of his plan to trap

and kill Voldemort. At the time I thought it was brilliant, but I insisted on taking his place in the fight.”

“Why?” asked Harry.

“Because he told me there was a very good chance he would die after defeating Voldemort. His visions always had him winning, you see, but somehow he would die in the aftermath; he never knew why. He only knew that Miss Granger was involved, and that he had seen visions of her suicide many times.

“I am an old man, and my best years are behind me. Mars was not even thirty; just think of what his genius would have achieved if he had not been cursed – cursed in so many ways.” Tears flowed again down Dumbledore's face.

“I insisted on taking the risk and facing Voldemort when he came for you, Harry. I wanted to ensure that Mars' brilliance would have a chance to develop to its potential. I will admit to also wanting the personal satisfaction of defeating Voldemort myself. My family has suffered horribly because of his enmity.”

“Mars eventually agreed to my demand, but it was just a ruse. It put me in a good mood; for the first time, I was confident of victory. However, he took advantage of my lightheartedness. He asked me to look at a device for him: that ruby you saw. When I touched it I was transported inside and placed in the center of an enormous maze. I should have seen it coming, but it had been years. Normally I can escape from this sort of thing in minutes, but this was the best I had ever seen.”

“You've been trapped in one before?” asked Ginny, who was somewhat calmer now.

“Yes, Miss Weasley. It was a very popular wizard game many years ago. I taught it to Mars while he was at Hogwarts. His official studies could never challenge him enough, and I didn't want his intellect to be idle.

“As good as this maze was, though, I should have been able to escape in no longer

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than eight hours, but each time I tried to move, I was opposed.”

“How?” asked Ron.

“Mars was fighting me. His will fought my every step. When I willingly took his gem, I gave him power over me. It allowed him to thwart my movements, but it must have been a tremendous effort for him to contain me. I would have not thought it possible.

“Hours ago I felt Mars lift his pressure on me. I could finally move freely, so I started solving the maze. I imagine he let me go when the battle first started in the forest – he told me that you had foreseen that, Harry.”

“He did look deathly ill for the last month,” said Ginny sadly.

“Why did he –,” asked Harry, but he was interrupted.

“I know there is much else you will want to know. Mars gave me all the details of his activities in Britain before he trapped me; it should explain a lot; but I must get you all to the hospital and find out the state of things. It is simply too pressing to defer,” explained Dumbledore.

“Can't we stay up here with him?” asked Padma, who had finally risen.

“No, Miss Patil, that would not be wise. We need to leave now.”

On their walk to the hospital, Harry noticed more suits of armor in the castle than he had ever remembered before. All of them saluted Dumbledore as he passed. The doors opened for them and closed behind them. Dumbledore seemed impressed.

“That activation charm had been lost for centuries,” said Dumbledore. “I spent many nights researching it when I thought Sirius was trying to kill you, Harry.”

When they entered the ward, Harry noticed that Luna was no longer with them. Professor McGonagall and a wizard he recognized from the Order of the Phoenix meetings were both unconscious in the first two beds. Madam Pomfrey quickly approached them; she looked terribly worried.

“Oh Albus, is it true? Have we lost Mordecai?” asked the nurse.

“Yes Poppy, my great-grandson is dead.”

Ron, Padma and Harry dropped their wands.

“Keep the students here,” Dumbledore continued. “Also, please send someone to fetch Luna Lovegood. The poor girl is delirious from a curse and wandered off from us. I have to leave now to find out the state of affairs all across Britain.” Dumbledore turned and walked out the door.

Ron and Padma both followed Madam Pomfrey's instructions without protest and were soon in pajamas and laying down in bed. Harry and Ginny, however, peppered her with questions. The nurse refused to answer anything until they too had changed, were in bed and had taken the medicine she gave them. Once they were finally settled in, she would only confirm two things: Mars' name really was Mordecai Saunders, and he was indeed Dumbledore's great-grandson.

Harry looked over at Ginny and saw that she was already asleep, although just a minute ago, she had been fussing furiously at the nurse. He yawned.

“Poppy, can you please help me for a second. She needs to go,” came Professor Lupin's voice from the next room.

The nurse looked at Harry, “Go to sleep Potter, it's the best thing for you.” She then went into the next room.

“Hermione must be in there,” he thought. “I wonder if she's all right? Hmm, I wonder if I care anymore? Why am I so sleepy? Drugged ...”

Harry then fell fast asleep. The potion that made him so drowsy also prevented him from dreaming. When he awoke Fleur was looking over him.

“Bonjour 'Arry,” she said sweetly.

“Bonjour Fleur,” replied Harry.

Harry put on his glasses and looked around. He saw that Ron and Ginny were

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awake and speaking with Charlie. Lily was silently sitting on Ginny's shoulder. Padma's eyes were open, but she was still lying down and looking sullen. When his gaze returned to Fleur he noticed that her eyes did not match the cheery tone of her voice. They were red and tired looking; Charlie's were the same.

“Are Bill and Steele all right?” asked Harry once he noticed they were not in the room.

“Yes Harry,” said Charlie. “They're meeting with Dumbledore now. Once Poppy let's you leave we'll join them. I'm afraid they'll want you to relive some bad memories from yesterday. Bill and Sally will want a first hand account of what happened to—to Mars.”

Fleur turned her head away from everyone.

“How about the others?” said Ginny as she hopped out of her bed, walked over to Harry's and sat on it. “Henri and Percy?”

Charlie asked Fleur if she would like to explain, but she shook her head and excused herself to go to the bathroom while wiping her eyes. Charlie sat down on Ron's bed, which was next to Harry's, and Padma came over and sat next to Ginny.

Charlie explained that at the beginning, the Battle for the Ministry went rather well. It seemed that the Donnies did not expect to have so many opponents. The first wave was driven back handily and then a small set of Defender shock troops snuck out of the anti-apparation field and appeared in the rear area of the Death Eaters. This was where Steele battled Dolohov and killed him. She brought back his wand and paraded around the other Defenders. The death of the enemy leader and the sight of his trophy drove the Defenders wild with blood lust. While Charlie was glad they were on his side, he felt uncomfortable being around them.

The rear attack put them into disarray and so Bill & Fleur lead an offensive that routed all of CADS and their allies. Fearful of enormous civilian and muggle damage the

Alliance and Ministry wizards were led back inside. They all thought that Mars would be joining them soon and then the battle would be swiftly ended.

This delay gave Spikes his chance to regroup and gather some reinforcements, via the Imperious Curse. Hours later they resumed their attack. During this attack Steele was contacted by Mars and told that the Battle for Hogwarts had been won, and that he would be there soon. They waited, but never heard from him again. The Death Eaters last attack was concentrated in an area that then suffered a mass desertion. All forty wizards and witches from the Department of Law Enforcement ran away from their posts and the flank fell immediately.

The defenders were overrun and retreated deep into the Ministry. Many officials surrendered, only the aurors and the Spirit Defenders kept discipline and fought as they retreated. Soon they were split in two and Charlie saw Minister Fudge and Amelia Bones go down fighting.

“I thought our number was up,” said Charlie as Fleur returned from the bathroom. “We were surrounded on every side and we couldn't disapparate to safety. I asked Sally for a kiss before we went to grave together and then prepared to make my last stand.”

“What happened then?” asked Harry.

“Did she kiss you?” asked Ginny and Padma.

“Yes she did and a miracle happened. Dumbledore showed up and dispelled the anti-disapparation jinx. We felt it fade and then heard his voice ring through the air telling us to teleport away,” said Charlie.

“Ze Alliance and the ze Defenders 'ave all rallied 'ere,” said Fleur. “While we lost many in the ze battle, our enemy lost vairy much more. Ze 'ole army zat attacked 'ogwarts was destroyed. Ze majority of 'is Death Eaters were killed and all of their leadership aussi. Mais, we lost ze Angel. Je n'ai jamais pensé que c'était possible.”

Tears again came to her beautiful face and Charlie got up and put his arm around

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her.

“Is Luna all right?” asked Ginny.

“Yes Ginny, she wasn't hurt, but she wanted to be left alone in her dorm. I think she is taking the loss very hard,” answered Charlie.

“How about Hermione?” asked Ron.

Ginny growled.

Fleur stopped crying and gave Ginny a questioning look.

“She was hurt worse than the rest of you, but she's recovering,” said Charlie.

“Poppy won't allow her any visitors except for Remus Lupin for some reason.”

“Like we'd want to see her!” snarled Ginny.

Harry nodded.

Charlie and Fleur looked at each other in confusion, Ron looked miserable and Padma wiped away a few tears.

“Is my sister Parvatti okay?” asked Padma with a sniff.

“Of the staff and students at Hogwarts, only Hermione and Mars were hurt seriously,” answered Charlie.

After lunch Madam Pomfrey allowed her patients to leave and they along with Fleur and Charlie headed to Mars' office. The students they passed in the halls were all very sad and most would not look at them. Harry became very depressed seeing the school in such bad spirits, it seemed even the structure of the Castle itself was in mourning.

“Harry, Harry! Stop!” came Heather Parkinson's desperate voice.

Harry turned and saw Heather and Mary running up to him. Both girls were crying.

“Is it true what they told us? That Mars died while fighting You-Know-You? Please say that it's not, please!” said Heather anxiously.

“It's not,” said Ginny sharply. “Mars defeated Voldemort easily.”

Heather squeaked at the mention of Voldemort's name and backed into Mary.

“He was then betrayed by one of his own students and he had to give his life to save Harry from the Killing Curse!” said Ginny angrily.

“What?” gasped Fleur, Charlie and Heather.

“Who betrayed him?” demanded Mary.

“Hermione Granger!” spat Ginny.

Charlie and Heather gasped.

“I cannot believe zat, Ginny,” said Fleur quickly.

“She didn't do it on purpose!” replied Ron.

“But why would she do that?” asked Mary now who looked very mad.

“Mars used a Dark Magic spell to defeat a Dark Wizard and Hermione thought that it was wrong. She decided that she was more qualified to decide how to kill Voldemort,” said Ginny viciously.

Heather again squeaked and ran behind Mary, putting a hand on her friends waist and looking over Mary's shoulder nervously.

“Hermione interrupted Voldemort's execution and said it was wrong! She ignored her prisoner, Lucius Malfoy, and then he recovered and took her wand from her. He then tried to kill Harry, but Mars took the curse instead. And Voldemort escaped in the ensuing chaos!” finished Ginny, who had worked herself up again.

“Stop saying that name!” whimpered Heather.

“Where's Hermione now?” asked Mary.

Charlie snapped out of his shock and said, “We need to leave for our meeting with Dumbledore, Bill and Sally.”

“Can we come?” asked Heather earnestly. “We want to know what happened while we were locked up with the Ravenclaws.”

Fleur said plainly, “No.”

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Heather and Mary both looked up at Harry hopefully; their eyes seemed larger than normal. Harry let the others get a little bit ahead of him and then waved for his students to follow.

When they reached Mars' office Harry opened the door. He let the others enter first and then then motioned for Heather and Mary to go next. The girls quickly slipped by him and ran to hide behind the wolf fountain.

Dumbledore was seated behind the desk while Steele and Bill were in front of it. Charlie and Fleur took seats in the front row of chairs while Harry, Ron, Ginny and Padma sat behind them.

“I know it's painful Harry, but I need you to now to retell the events you saw yesterday,” said Dumbledore.

Harry nodded and started describing the day before; he began when they first saw Steele and Charlie flying over the forest. Ginny, Ron and Padma helped many times in the story, but when Harry got to the point where Mars apparated into the room Heather and Mary gasped loudly and Padma started crying.

Everyone looked over at the fountain.

“Miss Parkinson and Miss Sladen, I think you'll find your eavesdropping quite a bit easier if you sat over here,” said Dumbledore as he pointed to the last empty chair to the left of Fleur.

Heather stood up immediately, but she had to drag the blushing Mary out from behind the fountain. Once Mary was exposed, the two first years scrambled over to the chair and both squeezed into it.

Harry next described the duel between Mars and Voldemort. Everyone seemed utterly amazed at each turn of events except Dumbledore and Steele. When Harry finally reached the point where Malfoy killed Mars, Charlie and Fleur burst into tears while Padma, Heather and Mary were sobbing – Steele and Bill, however, remained stoic. Their

non-reaction seemed even sadder to Harry; the misery of the room pressed down hard upon him. He desperately wanted to leave and grieve upon his own for a while.

“My great-grandson was not the only casualty yesterday, let us not forget the others in our mourning,” said Dumbledore.

The first year girls looked at each other with wide tearful eyes while Harry nodded at his Headmaster. Tears finally came to him. His mourning for Mars differed greatly than it had for Sirius. No one else seemed to really feel the loss of his godfather and because he alone had died, it seemed a very personal murder. The loss of Mars however was affecting the entire school and everyone was sad, not just Harry. Mars did not die a fugitive as had Sirius. He would be remembered for his great victory in the Battle of the Forbidden Forest and his defeat of Voldemort would become a thing of legend. A part of Mars would live on in all of them. Harry felt a cathartic wave pass over him.

“I now need to discuss a few matters with only the members of Mars' Alliance. Miss Patil you should go and find your sister, she is very worried about you,” said Dumbledore and then he turned his gaze to the two first years sharing a chair.

“I have a word of warning for you two. If either of you harass Miss Granger over this tragedy, I will expel you both forthwith. Do not test me on this subject.”

At first the girls tried to give Dumbledore an innocent look, but they then faded under his powerful gaze, averted their eyes and said in unison, “Yes, Headmaster.”

As they left, Mary walked over to Ginny's chair and put her hands on Ginny's shoulder.

“I'm sorry about the message I gave to Padma. I didn't mean it, I was just so mad about being caught and locked away. I take it back,” said Mary sadly. “I'm so sorry, Ginny.”

Ginny gripped her hand and accepted the apology. Once the three girls had left the room, Dumbledore spoke.

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“Mars explained many things to me the night he trapped me in the maze. I believe he knew it would be the last time that we would speak.”

“When Mars first arrived in Britain he discovered from Professor McGonagall that Harry and Ron wanted to be aurors. He knew a NEWT in Potions was required of auror prospects so he went to the Wizarding Examination Authority and changed their OWL results so they both could continue to study the subject.”

“What?” exclaimed Ron.

“I remember him asking me if I had received my results on that first night I met him. I wondered why he would ask,” said Harry.

“But how did he do that? The tests are tamper proof aren't they?” asked Ginny.

“Yes, Miss Weasley, they are cheat and tamper proof, but the grade that Professor Marchbanks puts down is up to her. Normally, of course, she takes the marks recommended by the Examiners, but Mars used a Confundus Charm on her. He then convinced her to give Harry and Ron Outstandings on the two Potions and Astronomy OWLs. After she submitted the marks, a Memory Charm was used to make her forget,” explained Dumbledore.

“Mars always was great with the Memory Charms wasn't he Bill?” asked Charlie.

Bill smiled warmly, “Oh yes, he hit McGonagall with one of those every other week when we were in school. Mars sometimes got us caught just to see how hacked off he could make her before he zapped her memory,” said Bill, now chuckling along with Charlie.

A stern look from Dumbledore stopped the laughing.

“Mars also revealed to me his use of Percy as a deep agent against the Death Eaters. Before that night only Mars, Percy, Charlie and Bill had any idea. Mars had caught Reynolds early in the Summer trying to curse a Ministry official, and decided to place the Australian under his control. Reynolds provided a lot of information, but his

sanity was always in doubt. As he fought Mars' curse, Reynolds became more and more unstable, but Mars desperately needed to keep him in place.

“Percy provided the perfect solution. An ambitious and intelligent wizard, who was desperate to make amends. Mars trained him up in Occlumency and few combat methods before sending him to infiltrate the Death Eaters disguised as Reynolds. Percy told me they had some way of making the polyjuice potion last much longer than an hour, but he did not elaborate.

“Numerous plots were discovered because of Percy's mission, and many Death Eaters were eliminated. His performance under that kind of pressure was extraordinary, I'm afraid he may be difficult to live with for a while,” said Dumbledore smiling.

“One of the plots Percy discovered was the bribery of many of the wizards from the Department of Law Enforcement. They were to desert when an attack was launched upon the ministry. Mars then spent the next two months tracking them down and placing them under the Imperious Curse,” explained the Headmaster.

“He used Dark Magic on non-Death Eaters?” asked Harry.

“Yes Harry, it was a most disturbing piece of information. Mars never really believed the prophecy could keep him from killing Voldemort until the night of Bill and Fleur's wedding. He always thought he just needed to find him and blow him to bits. Once he was convinced that the prophecy did hold power over him, all his plans had to change. He worried that the Ministry may fall before he could setup Voldemort in a trap, so he bribed and cursed his way into control of many officials. Once in control of so many of them, Mars could weed out the spies that Percy had discovered from his espionage. Without this, the Ministry would have fallen many months ago,” said Dumbledore.

“How many did he curse?” asked Steele.

“Forty.”

“Forty?” said Bill in surprise.

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“Yes, even he must have been drained by the effort. When he died, they were released and deserted their posts,” said Dumbledore.

“That's when our flank collapsed,” said Steele, whom Harry noticed was not nearly as sad looking at he would have suspected.

“Luckily you came and dispelled that anti-disapparation jinx,” said Bill.

“But I still don't understand why he didn't let you fight Voldemort so he could help us at the Ministry?” said Steele.

“My guess, Sally, is that he didn't think I would survive,” said Dumbledore.

“Steele,” she said sharply.

“But you said he saw his own death each time!” exclaimed Harry.

“His ego knew no bounds, Harry; Mars probably believed he could cheat death yet again. He had seen himself die in visions many times before,” answered Dumbledore. The Headmaster went on to explain Mars' visions of his and Hermione deaths and how he knew they were related. Dumbledore then mentioned Mars seeing the boggart and his greatest fear. Harry and Ron flinched at its mention.

“But if 'e knew 'Ermione was involved wizz 'is death, why pick 'er to be wizz 'Arry at ze end?” asked Fleur.

“Miss Granger would have never let Harry be without her when she knew he was in danger. Just like Miss Patil, Mr Longbottom and Miss Lovegood found a way to escape, so would have she. I am sure Mars felt more secure knowing her location,” answered Dumbledore.

“Why didn't he ever tell us that he was your great-grandson?” asked Harry.

“He told me,” said Ginny.

“He did?” asked Ron surprised.

“I asked him about his English family when I noticed he and Professor Dumbledore had the same eyes,” she said looking at the Headmaster.

“When he started at Hogwarts we decided it was best to keep his relation to myself secret. Mars was different enough as it was. I saw no need to further complicate his dealings with other students by being known as the headmaster's grandson. A few teachers knew: Professor McGonagall, Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape found out later,” added Dumbledore.

“He told me in our second year. The following summer he told Charlie when Mars came to stay with us for two weeks,” said Bill.

“Why did you and the nurse call him Mordecai?” asked Ron.

“That is his name Mr. Weasley. Mars is his nickname and initials. We now need to discuss your friend, Hermione Granger,” said Dumbledore.

“She's no friend of mine!” snorted Ginny.

“Nor mine,” agreed Harry.

“You are being very hard, and I think unfair, on Miss Granger. She has been a loyal friend to both of you for many years,” replied Dumbledore.

“Mars could have used some of that loyalty yesterday!” said Harry fiercely.

“She certainly didn't wish for this outcome, Harry,” said Dumbledore sternly.

“Outcome? Outcome?” shouted Ginny. “You make it sound like she cost us a Quidditch match!” Ginny was now standing and approached the desk. “Mars is dead! And Voldemort escaped. If she had kept her self-righteous mouth shut, the war would be won, the Ministry intact and Mars would be celebrating with us!” Tears of fury and sadness returned to Ginny's face and she sunk onto the armrest of Steele's chair.

Harry saw that emotion was now stirring in Steele. Her face looked similar to Ginny's except without the tears. Steele reached up into Ginny's lap and took Ginny's hand into her own.

“I am afraid it's not that simple, Miss Weasley. While at first I believed that Mars' plan to trap and kill Voldemort was brilliant, I now no longer think it could have

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succeeded,” said Dumbledore.

“Why?” demanded Harry. “Voldemort was totally disabled and I would have cast the curse easily if it hadn't been for Hermione!”

“There are two reasons, Harry. The first being that I do not think violence will be what finally vanquishes Voldemort. My grandson was most likely the greatest master of violent magic the world has ever known. If he could not kill Voldemort by violent means, how could you?

“The prophecy clearly says that you shall have power he knows not. Lord Voldemort knows violence very well. I believe it's what's in your heart that shall defeat him,” said Dumbledore sagely.

“His heart?” said Steele. “Is Harry supposed to guilt Voldemort to death?”

“I don't know how Harry will defeat him, Sally, but I am confident that he will.”

“Hope for best? That's your plan?” snapped Steele crossly. “No wonder Angel finally abandoned your advice. Sit back and let the innocents die is all you seemed to have thought up!”

Dumbledore seemed insulted by Steele's last pronouncement. “Sally, I know you are upset, but divisiveness is exactly what is not needed at the moment.”

“Angel was every bit as clever as you, Dumbledore. Don't try to cover your mistakes by claiming his plan was flawed. If that worm, Snape, had not poisoned Hermione's mind against Angel, she would have never doubted him when the crucial time came and Harry *would* have killed Voldemort. Snape is the cause of this! Angel should have killed him regardless of your will!” said Steele loudly as she stood.

“What you just said is another reason I believe it was the prophecy that thwarted Mars, not Hermione or Severus. If you asked Miss Granger whom she liked or trusted more, Professor Snape or Mars, do any of you really think she would chose Severus? Just as the prophecy saved Voldemort from Mars in Belarus and later at the warehouse in

Leeds, I believe it also was the reason Hermione interrupted Harry. Even if violence could kill Voldemort, his defeat would have to be by Harry. He could not be beaten by Mars and then left for Harry to execute,” said Dumbledore.

Dumbledore then looked sadly up at Steele and said, “I should have known that this was too early to discuss such painful events with you, Sally. I apologize for my insensitivity, could we please continue this discussion later?”

Steele's anger had not abated, but Harry could see her forcing it to the background. “Yes, Professor. Perhaps tomorrow after my family arrives will be a better time for discussion of the future,” replied Steele stiffly.

Dumbledore bid them goodbye and left the room.

“Sally, sera-t-il d'accord avec nos demandes?” asked Fleur to Steele.

“Il n'aura aucun choix, mon amie,” answered Steele.

After a few seconds Harry rose from his chair.

“I want to take a walk – outside,” he said.

“Me too,” said Ginny as she walked over to him.

Harry really wanted to be alone for a while, but after seeing how upset Ginny had been, he just couldn't ask her not to come with him.

“I'll walk with you to the front steps, Harry.” Steele headed for the door.

Harry and Ginny followed after her. Once they arrived outside they were immediately approached by three unsavory looking Defenders.

“Steele, we've had enough. We're leaving,” said one with a New York accent.

“You will leave when I order you to and not before,” said Steele coolly.

“Oh yeah? Let me tell you something Steele, you're not Mars, you're not even close. You're just his cousin who had a sick crush on him,” sneered the wizard.

Steele ignored the insult and replied calmly, “His journal clearly left me in charge. I am now the Supreme Commander, and you will obey. Do you wish to see his orders

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again?”

“I saw them fine the first time. I, and most of us, only agreed to leave the West or the South because of Mars. No one else could have made us come here.”

“You left because you were ordered to leave. Now you are ordered to stay.”

“I don't care what *you* order Steele.”

“Do you defy me?” she demanded.

“I do,” he answered weakly.

“Very well, the confrontation shall be now,” said Steele. She began unbuttoning her jacket. The challenger had only undone a few of his own buttons by the time Steele had removed her jacket and handed it to Harry. He looked more timid than defying as Steele glared at him on her way down the steps.

Defenders were now gathering near the bottom of the steps. Harry had no idea so many were at Hogwarts. Eventually the challenging Defender had his jacket off and walked down to Steele. He moved about twenty feet away from her and raised his wand over his head, Steele did the same.

The duelers stared tensely at each other for a few seconds and then both sprang into action. The challenger slashed his wand at Steele and a purple flame shot from it. Steele's legs both flew out to the side as she dropped to the ground in a side split; she leaned forward slashing her wand simultaneously. The defying wizard's curse flew several feet over Steele's head, while hers caught him directly in the chest. He put his hands over his heart and fell dead to the ground.

Steele sprang quickly to her feet and glared at the surrounding Defenders.

“Anyone else feeling defiant?” she shouted.

Her only answer was silence.

“Angel led us here to kill two witches and two wizards. The witches are dead, but it is up to us to finish the mission. We all owe him that much don't you think?” she asked

loudly.

“Aye!” shouted the Defenders.

“Now, I demand two oaths from you all. First an oath of loyalty to me as the Supreme Commander,” she said.

The Defenders looked nervously at each other and then dropped to their knees and swore their complete loyalty.

“Next a blood oath: To the deaths of Lord Voldemort and Peter Pettigrew or our own!” she cried raising her hand, that now held a sword, into the air.

The Defenders all swore the oath energetically. Steele then ordered them into the forest until the students were dismissed for the Summer.

“There are certainly are a lot of Defenders here now,” said Harry. He handed the jacket back to Steele.

“There's more on the way darlin', I need more help than Angel did,” she said with a touch of sadness.

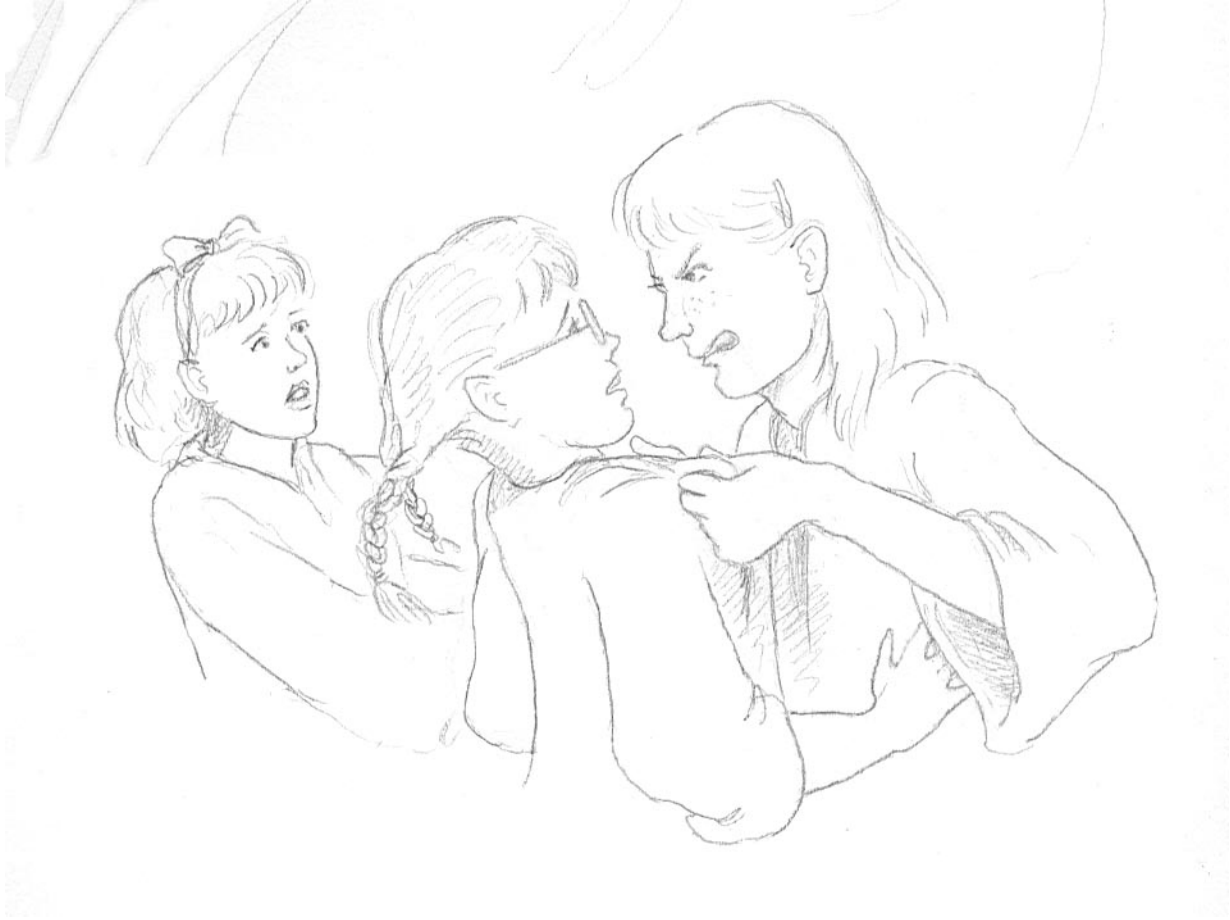
“Are they going to complain about having to stay in the forest?” asked Ginny.

“No hon, it's a lot better than the desert they're used to. I'm afraid I have to say good bye for now, I need to see Henri.” Steele then jogged into the forest.

Harry and Ginny walked out to Harry's favorite beech tree, sat down and stared at the lake. They said very few words as Ginny leaned on his shoulder and held his hand the rest of the afternoon. Both the peacefulness and Ginny's physical touch eased Harry's pain as he mourned his lost friend. He was such at ease under the tree, that he was loath to leave when night fell, but he knew they would be missed so he and Ginny went inside.

Even though they had skipped supper Harry was not hungry. Ginny kissed him goodnight and they both then went up to their dorms without speaking to anyone in the Common Room.

Chapter Thirty-Three – Aftermath



The next morning Ginny and Harry walked to breakfast holding hands. Just as Hermione's kidnapping had forced her and Ron to openly acknowledge their fondness for each other, the Battle of Hogwarts now did the same for Harry and Ginny. Harry smiled slightly as he remembered Cho telling him that the whole school thought he and Ginny were an item months ago.

Hermione and Ron were already at the Gryffindor table, but Ginny lead them to seats far from her brother. Hermione looked up at him and smiled weakly, but Harry turned away – he was still furious with her.

Soon the post owls flew into the Great Hall and a barred owl brought Harry his copy of the Daily Prophet. After he paid the owl and started to open the paper he heard

Hermione call out to him.

“"Oh Harry, don't read that. It will really upset you."

"Why? Has your ego caused the death of someone else he loves?" spat Ginny viciously.

Hermione burst into tears; she stood and ran out of the Great Hall . The other Gryffindors watched her in confusion. Ron threw his toast at Ginny, knocking over her cup and spilling pumpkin juice all over the table cloth. “Lay off her, Ginny. She's just as sad as you about Mars, you know!” He spun and sprinted after Hermione.

Harry opened up the paper and choked on his own pumpkin juice.

“What is it Harry?” asked Ginny as she leaned close to him.

The headline read “Minister Lennon awards Order of Merlin, First Class to Hogwarts Professor Severus Snape.” The article went on to mention how he had pretended to be helping Lucius Malfoy and led the Death Eaters into a ambush, which wiped them all out and saved Hogwarts. It also said that all of the Hogwarts students would have perished if not for Snape's ingenuity and bravery. Lastly it quoted Snape as saying “Mars died dueling with his rival, the Dark Lord. I always knew it was Mars' ambition to replace him, but I never dreamed he would put all of his students' lives at risk while doing it.”

Harry was devastated. He had only staved off his grief because he thought Mars had finally cleared his name as an outlaw. It was just unimaginable that anyone could believe that the greasy haired, yellow toothed Snape could be a hero. Snape getting the credit for Mars' sacrifice was almost as painful as watching Mars die.

“How could they print such lies?” demanded Harry.

"Oh Harry, the next article is even worse," said Ginny.

“American wizard Mars shows his real colors are dark and not red!” said the headline.

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The article accused him of cursing half the ministry and bribing the other half. "Fudge was nothing but his puppet," it alleged.

"But they were deserters! Muggles shoot deserters in war, would they rather he had killed them?" asked Harry incredulously.

"I told you he was a ruthless killer, Potter. I tried to spare you the harm Mars always brings to his adoring fans," hissed Snape's voice from behind Harry.

He and Ginny turned angrily around. Snape stood there leering down at them with the Order of Merlin medal hanging from his neck.

"You've got some nerve wearing that medal. You'd be dead if Mars hadn't sent Percy to save you!" spat Harry.

"Well Potter, I'll make sure to thank his corpse tomorrow at the funeral," replied Snape and he turned to leave.

Harry was furious, he began to jump up from the table when he heard the crack of a bone on bone collision. He saw Snape fall to the floor with Steele standing over him. She had her wand in one hand while the other was balled up into a fist.

"When this war is over Severus Snape, I will kill you myself," hissed Steele. "Harass this boy or girl again and I'll do it earlier."

She turned to Harry and Ginny. "I'd like you two to come with me. My family has arrived from the West."

Harry and Ginny nodded.

Steele turned her back on Snape, as if daring him to try a cheap shot, and walked out of the Great Hall with Harry and Ginny following.

Once in the Entrance Hall, Steele headed toward three witches standing near the front doors. The witches were all tall and dressed in very expensive looking jade robes. As Harry got closer he noticed all three had gray eyes like Steele and long dark hair -- in fact all three were completely identical.

"Harry, Ginny. These are my younger sisters, Kelly, Kathy and Kerry."

After the introductions Ginny asked sadly, "Are you here for the funeral?"

The triplets did not answer, instead they looked up at Steele.

"They're here to help, Ginny, and they'll be here until their family duty has been done." Two of the triplets looked intimidated by Steele's words, but the third nodded confidently. "Did the twins come with y'all, or separately?" asked Steele.

Again two of the sisters looked timid, but the third, Kerry, Harry thought, spoke: "They're not coming, Sally. Both said they had too much going on."

Steele looked livid. "His only child! The only boy of this generation, and his father and only uncle won't come to Angel's funeral? I don't believe it."

"You know how they are," said the first triplet.

"Why wouldn't his father come?" asked Harry.

Steele flicked her eyes at Kerry and then turned away.

"Harry, the men in our family are – well, um, very odd," said Kerry.

"And that's the best of them, most are borderline insane," added Kathy.

"They're all tremendously talented, each at something different, but for centuries they all have been slightly or completely off their rockers," said Kelly.

"Except Mordecai, he alone seemed to have escaped the family curse," said Kerry.

"Curse?" asked Harry.

"We don't know why or when it started Harry Potter, but all Saunders boys are cursed at birth. As Kelly said, they are just incredible at what they do, but they are totally incapable of taking care of normal every day things – especially finances or organization. Any kind of stress sends them right off the deep end. We, the Saunders women and girls, always have to handle most things for them, from when they are boys until they are old men," said Kathy.

"Mordecai seemed unaffected, so only one Saunders girl was sent to watch over

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him,” said Kerry.

Steele turned to face Harry and Ginny. “I came with Angel to Britain when we were both four,” she explained. “His mother insisted he be raised here. I was always with him until he went to Hogwarts when he was nine. We were separated until he got banished. I then joined him in the Spirit Defenders.”

“You were assigned to take care of him when you were only four?” asked Ginny astonished.

"That is our family duty Ginny, our men are cursed so we take care of them. The burden of the curse must be born by all Saunders," said Kelly.

"I never thought Mars would need our help like this though," said Kerry sniffing.

"Harry," said Steele. "You will be staying at our headquarters for the summer." She then looked at her sisters, "As will you three."

"Not with the Weasleys?" asked Harry.

"You'll be with them, honey. They've already moved there," she answered.

"They have?" asked Ginny.

"Yes, Jo Anne Lennon has called for your parents arrest and I'm not sure how well the wolves will work after Angel's passing," answered Steele. "Harry, I have to teach and protect you – those are my last orders from Angel. But I cannot be as subtle as he – I am sorry.”

“What do you mean?” asked Harry.

“Kerry will be responsible for you and Ginny, I know you hate this, but it's unavoidable. She's the least annoying of the triplets, so hopefully y'all will get along,” answered Steele.

Kathy and Kelly both glared at their older sister.

“You two follow me,” said Steele as she left. They stalked after her.

Kerry Saunders turned out to be very polite and a lot like Steele, just not nearly as

tense. Harry and Ginny learned a lot about Mars' American family and the curse upon them. They told Kerry many of their stories and by the end of the day gained a new friend. When Harry laid down in his bed that night, he wondered what the funeral of a great wizard would be like.

“Harry, wake up,” whispered a young boy's voice.

“What?” demanded Harry groggily.

“Shh!” said Mark Evans. “Be quiet, Harry. Get dressed quickly and mind you don't wake Ron.”

“Why?” whispered Harry. He sat up and put his glasses on.

“It's not safe to talk until we're outside the castle,” whispered Mark nervously.

The serious look on Mark's face made him decide to trust the first year. They left the dorm together; When they entered the Common Room, Harry saw Mary Sue Sladen and a cross looking Ginny standing near the entrance.

“Harry, what is going – ,” Ginny started to say.

“Shh,” said Mary.

Ginny scowled and rounded on Mary.

“Please Ginny, just wait a bit,” Mary whispered desperately,

Ginny turned from her and went over to Harry, and grabbed his hand.

Mark and Mary looked very tense as the four silently waited. After a few minutes Harry heard a quiet whistle from the other side of the painting. Mary nodded at Mark; he opened the entrance. As the door swung in, Harry saw the Fat Lady sleeping; she was snoring loudly. Harry and Ginny followed Mark and Mary through the doorway – Heather Parkinson was outside.

“The path is clear if not straight,” came a dreamy voice from nowhere. “I'll lead the way. You lot follow Heather, step where she steps and make no sound. The sensors are illuminated and the sentinels neutralized, but we still have much to fear. They are *all*

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looking for us tonight.”

“Who are *they*, Luna?” asked Harry in the direction he thought her voice was coming from.

Mark poked Harry in the back and put a finger to his lips.

Heather started down the hall minding her every step very carefully. She walked with incredible grace for an twelve year old. Mary followed her taking each stride exactly the same and then Ginny, Mark and Harry imitated Mary. After only a few seconds Harry saw Kerry Saunders laying on the stone floor, wand in hand and fast asleep. Heather passed her with scarcely a notice.

Every ten feet or so a patch of yellow could be seen glowing on the floor. Heather's path always steered wide of them. Their route meandered about the castle, but they encountered no one – even the oddly few paintings they passed were sleeping deeply. Eventually Harry noticed they were in the North Tower and approaching the room that held such horrible memories for him.

“Why are we going here? Where Mars was betrayed and killed?” whispered Ginny angrily.

“Because it has the only safe way out of the castle,” said the hidden Luna. “Hurry up and go inside.”

They entered the doorless entrance and walked over to the holes in the wall caused by Mars' stunning charm.

“Lily, are you with Ginny?” asked Luna kindly.

Lily flew out from under Ginny's hair and landed on Luna's barely visible forearm. Harry saw a small glass globe appear, as if Luna had taken it out of her robe pocket. She was apparently holding it by a string that was looped into the ball.

“Once I get this lot into the sphere, take them to the cave entrance and wait for me, would you?” asked Luna dreamily.

Lily nodded and flew up to the largest of the holes in the wall.

“You know about the cave?” asked a surprised Harry.

“Yes,” said Heather. “We’ll explain everything once we get there.”

“How are we supposed to all fit in that?” asked Ginny, pointing at the ball.

A potion bottle appeared where the disillusioned Luna was standing.

“Each of you take a sip of this and then quickly hand it to the next,” said Luna. The potion bottle made its way into Heather’s hand.

Harry saw Heather’s robes move as if Luna had put her arm around Heather’s waist. Heather took a swig of the potion and handed it immediately to Mark. Heather began shrinking. Within seconds she was tiny and standing in Luna’s vaguely outlined hand. The globe moved over to the diminutive Heather and suddenly she was inside of it.

The globe floated over to Mark. Mark’s robes moved as Luna now put her arm around him. He took a sip of the draught and passed the bottle to Mary. Soon he joined Heather in the globe. A few minutes later Mary, Ginny and Harry were also inside. Even though the glass ball swayed as Luna carried it to Lily, the inside of the globe was perfectly stable. The downy woodpecker grasped the string with her beak and took off into the outside air.

“Wow!” exclaimed Mark and Mary as they flew through the night sky.

Harry looked down and was shocked to see that the wolves of Mars were on the school grounds. One laid silent and alert staring at the Forbidden Forest while the other walked toward the front gates.

“What are Mars’ wolves doing here?” asked Harry as he pointed down. Ginny shrugged and shook her head.

“With Ginny’s family fleeing their home, Mars thought his sentinel guardians would be of more use here,” answered Mary.

“What?” shouted Harry in surprise.

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“What are you talking about?” demanded Ginny. She grabbed Mary by the collar and dragged her close. Mary was too terrified to answer her.

“Ginny! Calm down. Mars is alive, we're taking you to see him,” answered Heather gently.

Ginny was nose to nose with Mary when she demanded, “Are you serious? Because if you're taking the mickey about Mars' death, I'll strangle you right now!”

“I'd never joke about that,” squeaked Mary nervously.

“It's true Ginny, he used some odd spell to escape right before the Killing Curse hit him,” said Heather carefully.

Mary nodded desperately.

Ginny let go of Mary's collar and flung her arms around Mary's shoulders dragging her into a tight embrace. Mary's face still looked scared, as if she were certain that Ginny was about to follow through on her threat.

“You kidding me,” said Harry.

“No Harry, he sent us to sneak you two out to see him,” said Mark.

“But why sneak us out? Why aren't we celebrating?” asked Harry.

“Because,” answered Mary. “Mars said Professor Dumbledore had turned against him.” Mary finally relaxed and hugged Ginny back.

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Harry.

“You'll have to ask Mars about it,” replied Mary, stepping away from Ginny.

Lily flew into the dark tunnel and through it for several seconds before she landed in complete darkness. After a tense quarter hour wait, a light approached them. When it reached the globe they heard Luna say, “Amitto!” and she appeared. Luna tapped the globe with her wand, it vanished and all of its inhabitants slowly grew back to normal size.

“Snape is the knoggiest knob in the whole of knobdom,” said Mark to the wall.

A portion of the wall disappeared and the group walked into the newly revealed cave. Luna led them to the back cave where Harry and Ron had learned the Killing Curse. As they entered the last cavern Harry saw a man in the middle of the room. He looked to be a few inches above six feet tall, thickly muscled and had very short brown hair. He was wearing a Ravenclaw school robe that stretched tightly across his massive frame.

“Harry, Ginny, you made it!” said an unfamiliar voice.

“Who are you?” asked Harry.

“It's Mars,” said Mary.

“Look into my eyes, Harry,” said the man.

As soon as Harry gazed at the man's twinkling light blue eyes he knew Mars was before him. Harry let out a scream of triumph. Ginny sprinted forward and jumped into the large man's arms. Ginny kissed Mars repeatedly across his face as she squeezed his neck with her arms; when Harry arrived, Mars embraced him in a rib bending hug.

“It is wonderful to see you both,” said Mars aglow. “I was worried you'd be caught . The old man is on to me, I'm so relieved you made it through his security.”

“Mars, how did you survive the Killing Curse?” asked Harry.

“A Death Trap Charm is my guess,” came a voice from behind Harry.

As the students turned to see who had spoken, they heard an incantation:

“Dismissio!”

An orange light surrounded Mars and forced him backwards. He screamed as his knees started to buckle.

“NO!” yelled Mark Evans, pointing his wand at a figure in the doorway, it was Dumbledore.

“Leave him alone!” demanded Mary. She too aimed her wand at the Headmaster.

“No!” yelled Mars. “Do not interfere. Our disagreements do not involve you!” Mars fell to his knees in anguish as the orange light penetrated his skin.

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“Yield to me Mordecai, it will ease the pain,” offered Dumbledore.

“Never! You chose this path of estrangement and defeat. I shall not help you. I know I will lose this battle, but my strength *will* return,” replied Mars angrily. Mars dropped to his hands and knees and howled in agony.

“Why are you doing this?” demanded Harry – anger built up inside him.

“Do not judge him by how he treats me, Harry,” panted Mars painfully. “My differences with my grandfather are not your concern. He loves you as much as I, but he is misguided. You must all promise me to always trust your Headmaster. I will soon be gone and no one else has the power to defeat our enemy.”

The orange light surrounding Mars disappeared and he started to breath normally again. “Promise me now, all of you!” demanded Mars as he stood.

They reluctantly promised.

“Why will you be gone?” asked Ginny.

“I am banished again. I had no strength to defy him. I am spent from creating my new body,” replied Mars sadly.

“Why are you doing this, Professor? Why would you banish your grandson again? Aren't you happy he's alive?” asked a confused Harry.

“Don't you love him?” asked Ginny.

Dumbledore walked up the group, his wand was still aimed at Mars.

“I love him more than he will ever know, Miss Weasley. I am very happy to discover he survived, but he is much too dangerous to stay in Britain,” answered Dumbledore.

“I'm too dangerous?” said Mars fiercely. “You're the one responsible for CADS taking over the Ministry and all the lives lost in that battle. You kept Snape alive and his lies to Hermione kept her from trusting me. Your mistakes have killed thousands and let Riddle escape death yet again. How dare you call me dangerous to

Britain!”

“I’ve made mistakes my son and I accept the responsibility for them,” answered Dumbledore somberly.

Mars looked into his great-grandfather's eyes. “You really are scared of me aren't you? You honestly think that I would harm the only land that I love?”

“Yes. You would not mean to Mordecai, but you still would. You are far more dangerous than Lord Voldemort could ever be,” replied Dumbledore. He moved his eyes away from Mars.

Mars looked devastated by these words and tears began to pour down his face. Harry could not believe Dumbledore would say such a thing. How could he think that?

“If you hate me so, why has your spell not yet compelled me to leave?” asked a dejected Mars.

“I’ve given you time to let your students and comrades know you are alive and to say goodbye to them. You will leave when the students go home for the Summer on Saturday,” replied Dumbledore.

Mars head raised and some color returned to his face.

“Thank you. I can see your decision is merely misguided and not malicious, but you will pay for your treachery when I recover,” said Mars quietly.

Dumbledore smiled slightly at the threat. “While you're speaking with your Defenders tomorrow, you can order them home with you. I'm sure they themselves want to return,” said Dumbledore.

Mars glared at his grandfather. “So this is the reason for your mercy. Tired of Britain being overrun by foreign mercenaries, are you?”

“You know they do not belong here. Sally cannot control them as you did,” said Dumbledore forcefully.

“You underestimate her. None of them are her match.”

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“No single one I agree, but who does she have to help her lead them in the war? What does she know of Britain?” asked Dumbledore.

“Charlie'll help her, he likes Steele,” piped up Ginny.

“So will we!” said Harry.

“And us!” added Heather. Mary and Mark walked up beside her.

Mars smiled at them, but Dumbledore glared at his great-grandson.

“I will not allow this, Mars,” said Dumbledore sternly.

“You can't stop it or you wouldn't have asked me to do it for you. There are simply too many Defenders already here. You'll just have to learn to coexist with Sally. And don't forget Bill, he's now the leader of the Alliance, Sally will take orders from him if I instruct her to,” replied Mars who was starting to leave the cave. “Coming Headmaster?” he asked in a voice that somehow had become a bit cheerful.

Dumbledore managed a small smile, and started following him.

“I'm impressed you've mastered the Death Trap Charm, Mordecai.”

“I wouldn't call casting it once mastering it.”

All of the students exchanged very confused looks at the sudden friendliness between the two great wizards. They followed Dumbledore and Mars listening carefully to the conversation.

“I have never heard of another casting it successfully.”

“Tenskwatawa, has done it several times. I learned it from him,” said Mars.

“In the same way you learned glyphs from that ghost in Egypt who used to work for Ramsieve?” asked Dumbledore.

“No, Tenskwatawa is still alive in Ohio. He's used the charm a few times to you know, get a younger body,” said Mars with disgust.

“Oh dear, how's his mind held up?” asked Dumbledore.

“He wasn't really all there in his first body. It was hard work getting useful

information out of him. By the way, how did you know almost immediately that I had escaped alive? I figured I had at least until tomorrow before you got suspicious about the lack of a Morsmiraculumni,” asked Mars as they rounded the lake and neared the castle.

“When I went to move your old body to the mausoleum, I couldn't find your wand. I know the anti-theft enchantments you've put on it over the years would prevent almost anyone from being able to take it, so I strongly suspected you had been in the room,” answered Dumbledore.

“I pocketed it when you were listening to Ginny retell my duel with Riddle.”

Dumbledore nodded; they stopped just outside of the Front Doors. “So, your idea that a well placed Conjuring Charm could be used to stop Avada Kedavra proved to be true?”

“Yes, but the timing has to be perfect. It saved me several times this year.”

Dumbledore looked impressed. “I insist on you staying in my office for the night, Mars. At breakfast tomorrow, I'll announce the cancellation of the funeral and why. We'll start the end of the year feast early in celebration. I suppose you wish to speak with your students before we retire?”

“Yes, and without your presence if you don't mind,” said Mars.

“Very well, you have ten minutes,” replied Dumbledore and then he left for the stairs.

“How can you be so nice to him after what he did to you?” asked Harry once Dumbledore was away.

“I'm already banished, Harry, I cannot reverse it until my strength returns. There's no point in being rude. He could have easily made me leave without saying goodbye,” answered Mars.

“Don't tell me you've already forgiven him?” asked Harry.

“Oh no, Harry. I'll never forgive him for sending me back to those wastelands,”

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replied Mars with misty eyes. "He's tearing you all away from me ... it would have been kinder to kill me." Mars wiped his eyes and smiled at his students, his eyes still filled with sadness.

"Why were Luna and *these* three helping you instead of us?" asked Ginny.

Heather and Mary glared at her.

"Luna was my transport body, Ginny. I stayed in hers when I fled my own. She and I are very in tune and I knew my presence would bother her the least of my students. These three troublemakers," said Mars smiling, as he gestured at the first years. "Saw her acting weird and kept a twenty-four hour a day watch on her. I needed Luna to get out to the caves to create my new body, and Mark spotted her on the first trip. On Luna and I's next visit to the caves, I caught all three following Luna and decided to get them to help."

"Why not tell Steele?" asked Ginny.

"Sally? Do you really think she could keep my being alive a secret? She would be furious with my grandfather for forcing me into hiding. If you think Hermione can throw a tantrum, you should witness a few of hers. I thought about having Kerry help, but it seemed better to let them all think I was still dead. Sally needs to step out of my shadow for a while anyway.

"And speaking of Hermione, I saw how horrible all of you have been treating her! Knock it off this instant! Snape and my grandfather are the ones to blame for Riddle's escape, not her," said Mars sternly.

"But she caused all of this –," Harry started saying.

"Enough! I told you to forgive her and I expect my students to follow orders," interrupted Mars. "In fact tomorrow, I want all you to approach her and tell her you don't blame her for this. And afterward, you should each give her a consoling hug, she looked like she could really use one, last I saw her."

"Hug? Her? I doubt she'll even let me," said Mary crossing her arms.

"I don't want to hug *her*, Mars," said Heather indignantly.

"Well neither of you have a choice in this matter, you *will* do it tomorrow. I also don't want you two to ever tease her about this, she already feels bad enough," said Mars glaring at the girls.

Mary shrank from his gaze, but Heather bravely asked, "Can we still call her a bossy know-it-all?" She flashed a mischievous grin up at Mars.

"Well, she deserves that, but lay off until next year, all right?" said Mars grinning back.

"Dumbledore told us that your plan wouldn't have worked. He said he didn't think violence could kill Voldemort," said Harry.

"Yes, he told me the same idea when I arrived. It does fit the prophecy, but so did my plan. Harry, you would have killed Riddle if you hadn't been interrupted. The Headmaster is just trying to soften the disappointment you feel."

Harry nodded.

"Lily, will you be staying with Ginny now?" asked Mars, looking at Ginny's shoulder.

The small bird nodded her head.

"But, but, why?" asked Ginny anxiously.

Mars growled irritably.

"What?" asked Harry.

"I've just been reminded my ten minutes were up. I have to go now," said Mars.

"Ginny, Lily has no choice of who she falls in love with, it just happens. She may stay with someone for decades, or just a few months. She'll be your devoted friend until she falls for another."

"Love?" asked Harry confused.

"But you can't go back to America all alone," insisted Ginny. A few tears were

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falling down her face.

“I’m dangerous, remember. Maybe I should be alone?” said Mars bitterly. He turned and left.

On that depressing note, the students said goodnight to each other and went off to their dormitories. Harry laid in bed awake stewing over Mars' banishment. He just couldn't understand why Dumbledore considered Mars so dangerous. He heard Ron stirring. Harry pretended to be asleep and listened to Ron get dressed and leave. He figured Ron was off to meet Hermione. A few minutes later he heard Seamus, Neville and Dean moving; Harry then acted like he too had just awoke and said good morning.

Harry met Ginny in the Common Room; they walked hand in hand down to breakfast. He couldn't resist smiling at her as he thought of the school's reaction to Mars' return. Halfway to the Great Hall, Harry heard Dumbledore's voice booming throughout the castle.

“Attention students and staff, this is Headmaster Dumbledore and I have an announcement. The funeral for Professor Mars had been canceled because it was very recently discovered that our Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher actually escaped alive and has returned to us. Please join us now in the Great Hall for a day long celebration of his escape, and wish him farewell as he will be leaving for America tomorrow to attend to family matters. Thank you.”

Noise erupted around Harry and Ginny as the students were at first shocked and then jubilant. Instantly the crowd doubled their pace and Harry and Ginny were swept up in the festive mood.

The celebration was enormous and raucous. Music magically filled the air, dancing broke out constantly and the smell of food, butterbeer and firewhiskey permeated every corner of the Great Hall. Harry loved to see the looks on the faces of those who came to attend a funeral, but were instead asked if they wanted to meet the

party's guest of honor. Kathy Saunders and Mrs. Weasley both fainted when they realized Mars was before them. Harry and Ginny got to meet many aunts and female cousins of Mars.

Many hours into the party Harry stopped his merry making and pondered the significance of two people: One strangely missing from the party, Hermione, and the other strangely included in the guest list, Kingsley Shacklebolt. Mars was speaking to Kingsley at the moment with his hand on the auror's shoulder. Apparently it was a joke he was telling, because they both suddenly burst into laughter.

“I thought Kingsley didn't care for Mars,” said Ron.

“So did I,” agreed Harry.

“Fleur,” said Ginny to her passing sister-in-law. “When did Kingsley and Mars start being friends?”

“During ze Noel 'oliday. Zey 'ad a long mission together and I guess ze Angel grew on 'eem. What person could spend time with Mars and not like 'eem, I ask you?” said Fleur.

“Just Snape, but he doesn't really count as a person,” suggested Harry.

Ginny and Fleur both laughed loudly, but Ron was silent and acting like he was listening to something else. A few seconds later he stood up.

“I have to go for a bit,” Ron said as he walked toward the doors.

Harry saw Hermione's head peeking into the room and he tried to gesture for her to come over. However, she quickly backed into the hall when she saw he was looking her way.

Ron

Ron was listening to Fleur when he felt a gentle wind blow on his face. A second

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later he heard Hermione's voice: "Ron, I know you're enjoying yourself, but I have to talk to you right now. It's urgent."

When the message ended he heard Ginny and Fleur laughing.

"I have to go for a bit," he said and started for the doors.

When Ron arrived in the Entrance Hall, he saw Hermione standing a few feet away looking very serious.

"What's up?" he asked.

She reached out and grabbed his hand with both of hers and pulled him away from the doors.

"Where are we going?" demanded Ron. He forced her to stop after a few feet.

"This is our last night to see Mars you know? Why haven't you come in? He's been asking about you every fifteen minutes. Mars wants to see you, Hermione. He really told off Harry and Ginny for –"

"Ron, you must stop thinking about him for a minute," interjected Hermione.

"About Mars –," Ron was saying before Hermione interrupted him by standing on her toes and kissing him on the mouth. The timing of the kiss wasn't the only surprise to Ron – Hermione was kissing him in a way like *never* before. But why was she doing this now? Ron gently pushed her away from him.

"Hermione, why didn't you answer my question?"

"Oh, Ron," she said desperately. "You have to think about me, please."

She again kissed him passionately. This time also she ran her fingers lovingly through his hair and said his name softly between kisses. This felt very good he thought, and he marveled at how soft the skin of Hermione's neck and face felt. But wasn't he asking a question a second ago?

Hermione released him and looked up into his eyes.

"What are you thinking about now?" she asked.

“Another kiss,” he said.

She smiled at him, and then incredibly stepped away.

“I’m sorry to have been so forward,” she said.

“Sorry?” thought Ron.

“But I’m not an empath. It was the only way I knew how to get your emotions focused on something else,” finished Hermione.

“Something else?” he asked.

“Ron, you have been under an enchantment for the better part of a year. It was a subtle but very strong spell. Sometimes you slipped out of it for a few days, but you were always re-exposed and again brought under its power,” explained Hermione. She stepped up to the doorway and looked into the Great Hall.

“Enchanted for a year? What are you talking about?” asked Ron, joining her at the doorway.

“You have been under the influence of Mars, so have we all – some much more so than others,” Hermione said staring at Mars. He had one arm around Harry's shoulders and the other around Ginny as the three of them spoke with a laughing Kerry Saunders.

“What sort of enchantment would Mars put on us? And why?”

“Do you remember the night of our dementor training?” asked Hermione.

Ron nodded.

“When we got back to the Gryffindor Common Room, Padma and I were very distressed that we had done so horribly against the dementors. I was really upset at myself. Mars called us away from the rest of you and put his hands on our shoulders. All of the sadness and doubt flew out of me – the change was instant. He then stared into my eyes and I suddenly felt as if I had learned a lot and would do better next time. He had changed how I felt and what I was thinking, all without using his wand!” said Hermione.

“He did that with Harry and I too, but it was only when we needed help,” said Ron

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defensively.

“No Ron, he does it all the time. It's subconscious, Mars doesn't even know he's doing it,” stated Hermione looking back at Mars. He was now dancing with Heather Parkinson and Mary Sue Sladen at the same time – twirling each girl with a hand.

“So you're saying, each time he touches someone, or stares into their eyes, he's charming them? And he doesn't know it?” asked Ron.

Hermione nodded sadly. “He's mentally ill you see. It's his family's curse. Professor Dumbledore told me that he tried very hard when Mars was young to train his mind to protect itself.

“Mars had visions even then and they tore him to pieces mentally. How do you explain to a four year old when he sees someone die in a vision, and then three days later it happens, that it's not his fault?”

“I dunno, it sounds impossible,” said Ron quietly.

“Dumbledore started teaching him Occlumency when Mars was only four. He taught him not only to block others out of his mind, but also to be able to block off parts of his mind from himself. These lessons and Mars' own mental toughness kept him sane as he grew up. Everyone thought he had beaten the family curse.

“But severe stress brought back his illness. His mum's murder pushed him to the edge. When his mentor, Sirius, was framed for the murder of Harry's parents he went right over it. That's when Dumbledore first thought he started enchanting people to help him,” explained Hermione.

“Bill and Charlie?” asked Ron. He was watching Mars sing a song with his two eldest brothers, each with their arms around another's shoulders.

“Yes, Mars helped Bill defeat the glyphs that protected the richest tombs and Bill helped Mars learn to kill dementors and defeat the defenses of Azkaban. Even after Mars tried to free Sirius, he still then listened to Dumbledore and agreed to

surrender. The Minister however, double crossed Dumbledore and sent the aurors to kill Mars, remember?”

Ron nodded.

“Afterward, Mars was furious and demanded that Dumbledore help him overthrow the entire corrupt Ministry and replace it with something more democratic and fair. He wanted a complete social revolution and planned to destroy every last vestige of the old system. There was to be a total reshaping of society,” said Hermione shakily.

Ron was in awe. “So Dumbledore refused and then banished Mars to the Spirit Defenders?”

“No,” replied Hermione. She reached out a quaking hand for Ron to take.

“Dumbledore *agreed* to help him. He agreed to destroy the Ministry and shake up all of Britain. He was *totally* under his eighteen-year-old great-grandson's enchantment.”

Ron's knees wobbled.

“Dumbledore was talked out of it by the paintings in his office when he told them about his plans that night. He discusses everything with them it seems. The next morning Dumbledore realized he had been charmed. He was terrified that he had been controlled so completely. His love for Mars was great and this weakened his resistance to the enchantment. Dumbledore then devised a way to trick Mars into accepting the banishment. He knew he had to get his grandson away from him,” said Hermione. She moved very close to Ron.

“I know how much you like him Ron – we all love Mars. I also know how much he cares for us – I would be dead if not for him putting that note on the Manticore poison beaker.” Hermione sniffed sadly. “He's not a bad man at all, he's just flawed and tragically cursed. But please don't go back in there! He's too dangerous, even Dumbledore fears him now. You won't leave his side again if you get near him, I just *know* it. And right now, I don't want to be alone.”

Hermione looked up at Ron.

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Ron nodded and tried his best not to tremble as he stared into her misty eyes.

“Fancy a stroll around the lake?” he asked.

Hermione nodded and they walked out the front doors, never again to see the Angel of Justice.

The End

Epilogue



And the diminished Angel of Justice went back into the West, leaving behind the only land he ever loved. While he was portrayed as the worst kind of villain in the British press, the American papers were equally but oppositely biased. No mention was ever made of his use of Dark Magic, the press there it seems, had only an ear for his

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heroics.

His victory in the Battle of the Forbidden Forest was described as single handed and his domination of Voldemort was immediately put into the History of Magic textbooks in wizarding schools across the hemisphere. The above achievements in combat, coupled with his successful casting of the Death Trap Charm brought Angel's fame in the West on par with the South. In his birthland he was no longer a hero, but a legend.

It was however, a hallow fame for the Angel. His thoughts were dominated by the bitter loss at the Ministry, the escape of Voldemort and his second banishment. He longed for the return of his strength and to be with his friends and family fighting the war in Britain.

The war was then won and Voldemort finally destroyed for all time. If not for the Alliance and the Defenders all would have been lost. Those of us who know the truth thank our friend Mars everyday for his sacrifice. I will not however, speak of the defeat of Voldemort further, the losses incurred in it are still too dear to my heart.

Steele stayed in England and married Charlie, she even lets me call her Sally now. Two of her sisters, Kathy and Kelly, also stayed. They liked my twin brothers and soon the Weasley and Saunders families were bonded by three sets of wedding vows. The remaining triplet, Kerry, was ordered back to America by Sally to look after the Angel. Her duty as a Saunders woman could not be forgotten.

Mars rarely sent correspondences and he only sent them to myself and my sister. While his strength returned he delved deep into the ancient magics of the Maya and the Aztecs. His letters to me talked of little else. While his words were cheerful, I could feel his pain when I touched the parchment he wrote upon. The residue of his misery was unmistakable. I longed to help my best friend, but could think of nothing that would.

After three years in exile, Mars wrote to me and said his strength had returned fully

and that he was rejoining the Spirit Defenders. He then ordered Kerry to quit watching over him, but she refused. The next morning Charlie found her on his doorstep – here in England! She was tied up and very cranky. Kerry had no idea how she had arrived, but she did have a note from Mars, for Sally. The note thanked his cousins for their concern, but warned them the same treatment was awaiting the next one who tried to protect him.

For two years everything went well for Mars in the Defenders. The constant action and danger distracted his despair and he wrote much more often. But, as it has always been for my cursed friend, tragedy struck again. He and Dumbledore began arguing about the lifting of Mars' banishment. Mars was now strong enough to break the spell, but doing so would injure his venerable grandfather greatly. Dumbledore refused to release his grandson and their correspondance ended with some very harsh words.

Dumbledore approached me for help. He asked if I was interested in traveling to the South to see Mars; he thought a visit from Fleur and I would lift his grandson's spirits. I was for it of course, but the very day my old Headmaster came to visit, a large group of Malsumis spirits escaped containment and attacked a muggle town in Northern Mexico. They killed hundreds of people, including scores of children, and when Mars arrived at the aftermath his anger exploded.

He tracked the spirits down, destroying them as he went and chased the last few back to the temporal hole from which they had emerged. The demons retreated into the Realm of Spirits with Mars in pursuit. For four months he battled the spirits in their own world and soon they all fled to the dark recesses of their realm to escape his rage. Foeless, Mars returned to the Physical world still very angry.

The angry Angel was greeted with dreadful news upon his return. His grandfather had died of old age just two days before. Mars' last words to Dumbledore had been of hate and not of the love that he felt so much for the elderly wizard. He would never be able to retract the awful things he said.

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As his father had done five years before, Mars chose not to attend the funeral. The whole of Britain's wizarding world was in mourning, but that collective sadness paled in comparison to misery of Mars. When his Christmas card arrived at our house, just the sight of it threw my poor Fleur into hysterical sobs. My own eyes flooded with tears every second I read his yule greetings. The anguish radiating from the card was too great for me and I had to drop it onto the floor. From that day forward, all of my spare time was devoted to saving my friend.

I rejected Dumbledore's assertion that Mars was doomed. I also didn't believe it was stress that triggered his illness. He had been fine for years as a Spirit Defender. How more stressful a life could one have?

Mars' discipline and Occulemency skills had improved as he aged. Maybe, I dared hope, that now if he could have some respite from his visions, he could again fight off the curse of his family?

I researched all I could of the Malsumis spirits and their curses. All the sages laughed in my face when I inquired into removing the curse of Pillan. I managed to piece together only two possibilities after years of work: Force Pillan to remove the curse or kill Pillan himself. I was told by all experts that neither would be possible. I, however, was not deterred.

I called together Charlie, Sally and Fleur and told them my idea. I was surprised at how willing to help they were. Our youngest children would be grown in four years so we decided to train until then. Sally taught us her extensive knowledge of the Malsumis spirits and their world, and we sharpened our combat skills. When our youngest son turned eighteen we gave him the house, said our goodbyes and left for Honduras.

I was the only person in whom Mars had entrusted knowledge of his location. He had a mountain house that was located near a muggle village. It was also near the largest permanent gateway between the Physical and Spirit Realms in Central America. The

Angel's presence had kept the entrance unused for years. The local muggles did visit him sometimes, so Mars was not too shocked when he noticed people on his porch. He was stunned though, when he opened the door and Fleur threw herself into his arms and kissed him on each cheek.

When he recovered from his shock, Mars did not return our smiles. I grew very worried that we were too late to save him. He wanted to know why we had come. Didn't we remember that he had told Kerry he didn't want anyone looking after him?

I quickly interjected that we weren't there to take care of him, but to help – help him get back his peace. I told him that we had put all of our affairs in order back in England and that all of our children were grown. We had trained hard for four years and we were now ready to follow him into the realm of spirits, enter Pillan's evil abode and force him to remove his curse, kill the him if he refused or die trying. Charlie then added that we weren't going back England until Mars had had a nice nap and then came home with us.

The greatest wizard in the world then fell to his knees and wept like a small child. As the tears fell down his face, I could feel the misery and anguish leaving him. When he rose, I saw the twinkle of hope in his eyes that I had so longed to see. His self-imposed isolation ended as he embraced us all. No empath should ever be alone as he had been.

The four months Mars trained us seemed like old times had returned. He now thinks we're ready, so we are to leave this afternoon. Let it be known to whomever finds this journal that the following oath was sworn today:

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We pledge our wands, our honor and our lives to the pursuit of Pillan, until he has agreed to remove his curse, until he is dead or until we, ourselves pershish.

So does swear: *William Weasley*

Fleur Weasley

Sally Saunders-Weasley

Charles Weasley

Mordecai Albus Ramon Saunders

Ginny put down the journal.

"Well, I guess I now know where they went. It's been three years since Bill left England, but there's never been a sign of Mars' Morsmiraculumni, so he has to be alive. I don't see Mars letting the others pershish either; they must still be chasing or fighting Pillan," thought Ginny.

She sat down on a couch in Mars' living room and opened a chocolate frog package. "Oh look Lily, it's a Angel of Justice card!" She held up the picture. Mars winked at both her and Lily.

"I liked him best with the long hair like Bill's," Ginny said looking around. "This is a nice place isn't it? Why don't we wait for them here? They should have some sort of

adoring crowd to greet them when they return from a journey like theirs."

Authors Notes

Who is Mars?

The concept for Mars/The Angel of Justice was based on my love for Dumbledore. I always thought just how lucky the cause of good was that the most powerful wizard of the era was not only on their side, but he also was wise, patient, had very little want of personal gain, was law abiding, did not want to run things himself and was very forgiving and humble. Dumbledore's personality was virtually perfect.

I then thought what if the old man was not so perfect? What if he was flawed, fundamentally, but still so powerful? Mars began to form in my mind. I thought of an arch-wizard, one much more powerful than Voldemort (as Dumbledore is), and on the side of good, but with enormous problems.

Mars was to be kind, charming, brave and brilliant like Dumbledore, but he was also to have an enormous ego. His morals and ethics fitted his beliefs and not those of society. If he thought someone was guilty, then they were to be punished. Mars would never consider a jury or judge to know better than he. That was not enough weaknesses in his character though. While Rowling hides Dumbledore in the background and has him absent virtually anytime anything important happens, I didn't want to do this with Mars. I wanted to dare to describe an overpowered character in a story, so he needed more drawbacks. His family curse (his insanity), the curse of Pillan and the curse of being the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher would drag him down.

Mars is a borderline Megalomaniac. He's doesn't reject others' opinions rudely, but he routinely ignores them. Failure is simply unimaginable to him. He is also very depressed. He is desperate to be loved, so he subconsciously charms those around him so that they love him as a father, son or brother. The females he charms worry about him and fuss over his happiness, while the males he charms look up to him and think him an

undefeatable hero. Subconsciously Mars rewards those he charms with positive feedback. When you touch Mars, you feel safe, you feel confident, and you feel loved. This makes you always want to be around him and eventually you always want to make him happy.

Mars' ego dooms him in the end. He was very reluctant to ever accept a prophecy had power over him and even once he accepted the prophecy about Harry and Voldemort, he did not respect it. Even though Mars *knows* Hermione is the key to his death, he refuses to keep her away from the final showdown. He is convinced that he can handle anything – though he did at least have Luna near him for an emergency escape.

Mars came to Britain with a very clear plan. Kill Voldemort, Pettigrew, Bella Lestranger and Narcissa Malfoy – the people he blames most for Sirius' death. Dumbledore convinces Mars to teach Harry Occlumency and become the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher so that Harry will be prepared to face Voldemort. Once Mars is around Harry, Hermione, Ginny and Ron for an extended period he begins to love them deeply. His iron discipline wanes as he has not known such happiness since he was a teenager and was around Bill and Charlie. The only decent company Mars has had for eleven years has been Steele, the rest have been misfits and demons; he has forgotten how wonderful nice people were. His actions and words are no longer perfectly scripted.

Mars shows his humanity as he plays with the children of Hogsmeade in Chapter 24 and even blows off Steele's warning. This public show of love to the Herberts is seen by the Death Eaters and they horribly murder the innocent family. When Mars sees what happened to the Herberts, he knows it was his fault, even though he blames Dumbledore. He snaps and all rules/morals/ethics are shoved aside to make way Voldemort's destruction.

Mars does his best to protect those around him as he prepares for the last battle, but he will accept no arguments. When Dumbledore wanted to change Mars' plan, he trapped his grandfather in the gem prison (and learned very quickly that grandpa is still more

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powerful than him) and his subconscious charms Flitwick, Hagrid and Sprout into helping him. He hides the students and teachers away and tells the three teachers he does not trust to flee the school or face his wrath.

What about Sally (Steele)?

She was originally to be just a fangirl of Mars. Sally was supposed to be only an example of what happens when someone experiences long-term exposure to Mars' enchantments. She, however, grew into much more.

Her eyes look cold to most people, but to budding Seers like Harry and Luna her eyes are empty. This is because, like an emotional vampire, Mars has sucked all of the love out of his poor cousin. She has no love left for anyone but Mars, not even for herself. In Mars' eleven years of exile, only Sally was there for him. The poor girl was forced out of childhood at four by her family to look out for Mars and she has given up EVERYTHING to make him happy. I had enormous sympathy for her and expanded her character greatly.

She will have an important role to play in my version of Harry's seventh year. She will step out of her cousin's enormous shadow, learn to love herself and as the Epilogue tells, marry Charlie and have several children.

Who is more powerful, Mars or Dumbledore?

It's Dumbledore, let there be no doubt. Mars' spells are more efficient because of his UAS system, but DD is still the man.

How did Mars apparate inside of Hogwarts?

He and Bill discovered that Glyphs were the magic that prevents wizards from apparating inside the school. After leaving Hogwarts, Mars learned Glyphs from the ghost of one of the ancient Egyptian Glyph masters. Mars then taught Bill some of their secrets, and once he was banished he taught Steele. Luna learned a little during the year. No one else in the world can read Glyphs, but very learned wizards will recognize them.

How did Mars block Avada Kedavra?

This explanation is based on something I thought was really dumb in the Harry Potter books. The Killing Curse is SO powerful that even when cast by a dweeb like Wormtail, the spell will go right through the shield spell of Dumbledore! But of course headstones, in Book 4, and statues, in Book 5, can block it! Puh-lease. To make light of this silliness, I have Mars summon a small slab of marble in front of him and it takes the blow. I would have come up with a better explanation, but I had a point to make. ☺

Why is he an Angel?

Mars is known as an Angel because he fights demons (Malsumis Spirits) and even follows them into their own Realm. What else could manage that? He is also known as Angel because many Native North American tribes believed the gods had touched insane people – they were considered holy, I stretched it to also be Angelic.

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Did Mars let Dumbledore win the Sumerian Wizards Duel?

Nope, he told Bill, Charlie and Harry the truth. The old man beat him.

Isn't Mars just a Mary Sue?

Sigh, please understand what a Mary Sue is before you call a character that. Hermione IS a Mary Sue, 100% confirmed by JK Rowling. Mary Sue's are Author Avatars and are based on the Author or the Author's fantasy. Gandalf is another famous Mary Sue, but Dumbledore is not one. A powerful or important original character is NOT a Mary Sue. One time, I remember reading a typical Harry Potter fanfiction website that had an idiot saying that he hated Luna because she was such a Mary Sue and the same day he posted how much he liked Hermione. Get a grip. Mars is nothing like me and I sure don't fantasize about being a depressed megalomaniac.

A Mary Sue did sneak into my story though, her name was Amy and she started acting like I did when I was 11-12, and she got way more lines than she should have. As soon I caught myself giving her lines that did not advance the story, but were there only because I liked getting Hermione cheesed off, I realized what was happening. I deleted two of Amy's scenes; I gave a lot of her lines to Heather and Mark and I changed her name to *Mary Sue* Sladen so I would remember what she was.

Are Ginny and Harry still mad Hermione?

Nope, everything is patched up. Heather and Mary will still give her Hell next year though, but not because of what happened with Mars.

What was the message that Heather and Mary told Padma to relay to Ginny?

It was so rude that I will not repeat it. I originally had Ginny tell the others what it was, but then I realized, wow, no way does that get into writing. It then struck me that leaving it a mystery would make the message seem just as rude, and the actual vulgarity could be skipped.

Was CADS going to use the Black Shroud that Sirius fell through to kill Percy?

Yes, that's exactly was going to happen.

It would have been better if you had just left Mars dead.

Several of my Beta readers (I had more than 50) suggested this and the first draft actually had Mars stay dead after Malfoy popped him. But this ending caused two major problems. Harry and Ginny would have never forgiven Hermione if Mars had really died. Originally it was Harry that attacked her and he really hurt Hermione. This was WAY WAY too depressing. The second reason was that if Voldemort had devised a way to escape death from Avada Kedavra, then a wizard much more powerful than him, like Mars, should also be able to do it; this is especially true in this case since

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Mars knew a close brush with death was coming.

Will you bore us with a seventh year book?

Yes. It's called: Harry Potter and the Ancient Library. In addition to preparing for his apocalyptic showdown with Voldemort, Harry's main storyline will be the discovery and completion of a quest. Throughout Hogwarts' history, all its most gifted students have taken up this quest– to find the Ancient Library and learn its secrets, but none have ever completed it. Even the likes of Dumbledore, Grindwandel, Voldemort and Mars failed – though some came very close.

Chapters 1, 4 and 14 are written in my head and parts of them have been typed up.

Is Mars in it? No, but he appears in two flashbacks.

How about Steele? Yep, she's got an important role.

Is she the new Defense teacher? Nope.

You can sneak peek a illustration from a Chapter 4 flashback:

http://hpbook6.freewebsite.org/art/Harry_Potter_Ancient_Library-Mars-Sally-limo.jpg

What about the pursuit of Pillan? Does Mars ever get to sleep?

I've got a lot of ideas for it, in fact more than I do for the Harry's seventh year.

Can I Beta read for your next two stories?

Sure. Send me an email or an instant message.

Did Padma have a crush on Mars? Did any other girls?

Yes. Padma had a huge crush on him. No other girls in the story did, but I think a few readers have had a bit of a crush on him. :-)

Questions:

If you don't mind, please copy these questions into an email and send me your answers. I would really appreciate the feedback. You could also post your answers to the message board of this webpage: <http://hpbook6.freewebsite.org/wwwboard/index.html>

1. What scenes did you like the most? Did you think Hermione and the dementor scene was scary?
2. What scenes just didn't work for you?
3. What new characters (or bits about them) did you like best?
4. What new characters (or bits about them) did you like least?
5. What JK Rowling characters did I do the best job on?
6. What JK Rowling characters did I do the worst job on?
7. Did you like the fight scenes? The new spells? The new set of Hogwarts adventurers? (Mary, Mark and Heather)
8. Did you ever think Mars was dead?

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9. Did I make the very end understandable, or were you not sure why Mars was so dangerous?

10. Demographic Info – Please, DON'T be specific. I am not trying to track anyone, I just would like to know what groups liked what parts.

Feel free to skip these two questions if they make you uncomfortable. Where do you live? (Be generic, ie SW France, Ohio, Western Russia)

What is your age group? (ie teen, young adult, middle aged, older)

11. What scenes did you find funny: Hermione's revenge? Luna in Ron's dream? Heather and Mary getting the best of Hermione? A different scene?

12. Was I too mean to Mars or Hermione at the end?

13. On a one to ten scale where would you rate the story?

14. Was the WWN parody of the news broadcasters funny, or just annoying?

15. What Rowling character would you have liked to have seen more of?

Final Thoughts

If you liked the story, please tell others about it; spread the word! Please put a link to my website from your webpage or blog, but most of all let me know you liked it. You can send me email harry_potter_aoj@yahoo.com, instant message: Yahoo – harry_potter_aoj, AIM – gnyarlthotep, or leave a message on my webpage: <http://hpbook6.freewebsite.org/wwwboard/index.html>.